

MASTERPIECE

Charles Dickens: Biography

The most popular storyteller of his time, a zealous social reformer, the esteemed leader of the English literary scene and a wholehearted friend to the poor, Charles Dickens was an unrestrained satirist who spared no one. His writings defined the complications, ironies, diversions and cruelties of the new urban life brought by the industrial revolution.



Writing saved Dickens, both financially and emotionally. As an adult, he set his life's work on exposing social ills, using his boundless talents and energies to spin engaging, poignant tales from the streets. In doing so, he also introduced new accessible forms of publishing that proved immensely popular and influential. Dickens's keen observational style, precise description, and sharp social criticism have kept his large body of work profoundly enduring.

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born February 7, 1812 near Portsmouth, England, the second of eight children. Dickens's father was employed as a minor civil servant in the Naval Pay Office, a job that required the family to move a number of times. The Dickenses spent many of Charles's early years fairly pleasantly in Chatham but made their final move to an undesirable part of London. Charles's father lived beyond his means, and floundered financially.

Two days after Charles turned 12, his father was thrown into Marshalsea Debtor's Prison. Charles was already working at the Warren Blacking Company, pasting labels on bottles of shoe polish; he'd left school at age 10 to help support the family. Now he was on his own, while the rest of the family roomed in a jail cell with the elder Dickens. Young Dickens lived in a miserable lodging house and worked long hours in squalid conditions, supervised by cruel masters. Though Dickens lived away from his family for only four months (his father came into an unexpected inheritance), the traumatic experience shaped the rest of his life. He came to believe that money and position in Victorian England meant everything. His early encounters with such grave conditions gave Dickens rare and deep insight into life's inequalities and greatly enriched his writing.

Dickens soon returned to school, enrolling at Wellington House Academy in London, where he excelled. He loved reading, especially adventure stories and magical tales by other English writers such as Shakespeare, Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, and Henry Fielding. At this time, Dickens began submitting "penny-a-line" material (whereby writers were paid per line for their work) to the British Press. Such submissions largely took the form of factual information about fires, accidents, and police reports. Dickens took great pride in meeting deadlines and beating other reporters to key facts, and his sharp accuracy was well respected.

His parents could not afford to complete his education, and at 15 Dickens reluctantly left school to begin the tedious routine of a law clerk. Shorthand played an odd but key role in his career.

While clerking, he taught himself this difficult skill in just 18 months and immediately parlayed his newfound knowledge into a job as a newspaper reporter. Dickens left drudgery behind for good, finding the excitement and intellectual stimulation he'd been looking for in writing.

Dickens first worked at the *Mirror of Parliament*, founded by his uncle, and gained a great reputation for accuracy, quickness, and sharp observation. He covered the Reform Bill debates, legislation that extended voting rights to the previously disenfranchised, an experience which both cemented his commitment to reform while, at the same time, instilled in him a lifelong suspicion of reformers. *Mirror of Parliament* did not pay its writers when the government was in recess. At such times, Dickens relied on freelance court reporting for various newspapers such as the liberal daily *Morning Chronicle*. Such work sharpened his ear for conversational speech and class mannerisms, which he called on later to portray characters with remarkable realism.

When the *Morning Chronicle* expanded, Dickens jumped at the chance for a staff position. He later commented to his biographer John Forster that he “went at it with a determination to overcome all difficulties, which fairly lifted me up into that newspaper life, and floated me away over a hundred men’s heads.”

At this time, Dickens also started publishing tales and sketches of street life under the pseudonym “Boz” in periodicals such as *Monthly Magazine*, *Bell’s Weekly Magazine*, and *Morning Chronicle*. English professor James Diedrick notes of these efforts, “Many of the sketches are in fact essays, possessing a colloquial immediacy that vividly captures the lower- and middle-class street life he observed firsthand.” They were immensely popular and were ultimately collected in two books, *Sketches by Boz* and *Sketches by Boz II*. These sketches provide much of the subject matter that would later appear in Dickens’s fiction. They also set Dickens’s reputation as a *flaneur*, the French-derived literary term for “connoisseur of street life.”

Book publishers Edward Chapman and William Hall were so impressed with *Sketches by Boz* that in 1836 they asked Dickens to write a series of stories to accompany illustrations by Robert Seymour, one of England’s most popular comic artists. Their plan was for Dickens to write 20 monthly installments, which they would sell for one shilling each. Dickens’s friends warned that such a publication mode might cheapen his reputation. Up until then, serials were used largely for inexpensive reprints of classics or trivial nonfiction. Dickens found just the opposite of these predictions. Known as *The Pickwick Papers*, the serial was enormously well received both critically and popularly, and made Dickens a celebrity at the age of 24. The first run sold 400 copies; the last run sold 40,000. All of Dickens’s future novels would appear in serial installments, setting a new Victorian trend in publishing.

Dickens used his first payment of 29 shillings from *The Pickwick Papers* to marry Catherine Hogarth, with whom he would eventually have 10 children. He also took a three-year lease on a house at 48 Doughty Street at 80 pounds a year, giving him security he’d never known before. Dickens idealized Catherine’s younger sister, Mary, who is thought to be the model for Rose in *Oliver Twist*. Mary’s untimely death at age 17 greatly affected him.

In 1837, Dickens began editing a monthly called *Bentley's Miscellany*, a collection of fiction, humor, and other features published by Richard Bentley. In the second issue, Dickens began installments of his first novel, *Oliver Twist*. The book followed the harsh childhood experiences of an orphan, and was largely an indictment of the new Poor Laws legislation, which Dickens felt institutionalized ill treatment of society's least fortunate. Bentley put out the book in three volumes in 1838. Though *Oliver Twist* was a huge financial and critical success, Dickens and Bentley soon parted over financial and editorial differences.

Dickens continued publishing novels, as well as essays and letters to newspapers regarding social reform. In 1842, he visited America for the first time and shocked his hosts by denouncing slavery. He published *American Notes* upon his return to England, criticizing many aspects of American life and setting off a furor among Americans. Dickens depicted his low opinion of American manners in his 1843–1844 novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*.

Dickens had used humor wonderfully to liven up the dark truths of his novels; in the 1840s he refined his style, widening his range with literary devices such as symbolism. In *Bleak House*, for example, he uses the toxic London fog to symbolize society's ills toward the downtrodden, his familiar theme. Dickens still offered funny, irreverent characters and situations, but now his tone was somewhat bitter, often taking the form of biting satire.

Dickens always had an interest in theater, and later in his career, he took great pleasure in producing and acting in amateur dramas. He collaborated with author Wilkie Collins on a play called *The Frozen Deep*, which his theatrical company performed for Queen Victoria in 1857. That same year, Dickens left his wife for actress Ellen Ternan; he'd never felt close to Catherine, despite their years together, and considered her his intellectual inferior. Around this time, Dickens also began to give public readings for pay, traveling throughout Europe and America.

Dickens continued editing periodicals, beginning the weekly *Household Words* in 1850, which featured installments of *Hard Times*, among other works. In 1859, he began a new weekly titled *All the Year Round*, where *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Our Mutual Friend* and the unfinished *Mystery of Edwin Drood* appeared in serialized segments.

Dickens's final days were spent at his beloved home Gad's Hill, an estate he'd admired as a child. He continued his public readings in London. On June 8, 1870, he had a stroke after a full day's work and died the next day. Some of his friends claimed his death was caused or hastened by the dramatic public readings he gave during this period of the final murderous scene between Bill Sikes and Nancy from *Oliver Twist*. Five days later, he was buried at Westminster Abbey.

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