

Charles Dickens

Charles John Huffman Dickens (1812-1870) was born in Landport, Portsea in 1812. The second of eight children, he grew up in a family frequently beset by financial insecurity. His father was a poor and easy-going naval clerk who was condemned to Marshalsea Prison for unpaid debts during 1824. His family had to live in prison with him.

Before Charles was 12 years old, his mother arranged for him to start work in a London blacking warehouse where his job was to stick labels on bottles for six shillings a week. It was his parents' neglect of him, rather than the work itself, which imprinted itself on his young mind.

Charles received little formal education till an unexpected legacy allowed his family to pay off their debts and he could resume his education. He travelled, worked a good deal and studied in the British Museum.

When he was fifteen he worked as a law clerk and a freelance reporter in the courts and in Parliament, which offered him the first-hand material for an accomplished novelist. He contributed sketches of London life to various newspapers and periodicals, and these were collected and published as *Sketches by Boz*, which attracted the English reading world and brought him overnight fame. Originally his novels appeared in serial form, according to popular fashion and demand. They were published at monthly intervals and then collected into a single hardbound volume.

This method of publication explains the tedium and length of certain passages, which give the impression of having been written expressively to fill space at any cost. The plots often convey the impression of a sequence of skilfully linked episodes rather than of steadily developed themes.

A tireless traveller, always eager for new experiences, and a brilliant journalist, Dickens exploited these interests and talents in several books originating in journeys abroad, which impaired his health and hastened his death. Some of the social injustices such as slavery, political corruption, flaws in the prison system he witnessed in North America became bitter references in his works; they were strongly resented by many American readers.

In 1836 he married the pretty Catherine Hogarth who bore ten children. His feverish social commitments and incessant literary activity caused frequent argument with his wife.

In 1857 Dickens met the noted actress Ellen Ternan and in 1858 agreed with his wife on a separation after twenty-two years of marriage; his sister-in-law remained with him to care for his children.

In 1858 he threw himself into the first of a number of tours both in England and in America in which he gave dramatic public readings of his novels. His readings met with a brilliant reception. But his health suffered from the excitement and fatigue of these readings, into which he threw a great amount of dramatic power and physical energy.

A contemporary witness reported "He seemed to be physically transformed as he passed from one character to another; he had as many distinct voices as his books had characters; he held at command the fountains of laughter and tears ...

When he sat down it was not mere applause that followed, but a passionate outburst of love for the man”.

He gave his final reading in London, March 15, 1870, and in the same month appeared the first part of a new novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, a mystery story influenced by the style of his friend Wilkie Collins. About half of this novel was written, when its author one afternoon, while at dinner, was struck down by an attack of apoplexy. He lingered in a state of unconsciousness for about a day, and died on the evening of the 9th of June 1870, at the age of fifty-eight at his home, Gad's Hill Place, near Rochester, Kent. On 14 June he was buried in *Poet's Corner*, Westminster Abbey, close to the monuments of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

The sudden death of an author so popular and so thoroughly national was lamented by all classes, from the sovereign downwards, as a personal calamity. Queen Victoria wrote in her diary: “He is a very great loss. He had a large loving mind and the strongest sympathy with the poorer classes”.

Biography card

- 1812 - Born in Landport, Portesea, England of humble family (his father John, an easy-going and extravagant person, was a minor clerk in The Naval Pay Office at Portsmouth).
- 1821 - His father was arrested for debts and taken into the notorious Marshalsea Prison, where he was joined by her wife and four of their children.
- 1824 - Young Charles scrapes out a living by tying and labelling pots in a shoe polish factory at Hungerford Stairs; he did not receive any formal education, he spent only two years at Wellington House Academy.
- 1827 - Worked as a clerk of a legal firm in Gray's Inn; taught himself shorthand.
- 1828 - Became a freelance parliamentary chronicler on *Mirror of Parliament* and on *True Sun*.
- 1829 - Started a romance with Maria Beadnell; it lasted about four years.
- 1833 - Hesitantly began his career with the publication of stories in *Monthly Magazine*.
- 1836 - Married Catherine Hogarth, who bore him ten children; lived at Furnival's Inn.
- 1842 - With his wife, he made his first tour to the United States and Canada.
- 1844 - Travelled to Genoa, where he wrote his minor work *The Chimes* and some short Christmas stories.
- 1846 - Travelled extensively and visited Lausanne and Paris, he founded the *Daily News*.
- 1849 - Planned, edited and contributed to *Household Word*; began successful public readings from his novels in Britain and America, first for charity and later on a professional basis.
- 1858 - Left his wife because of his association with a famous actress.
- 1859 - Editor of *All the Year Round*.
- 1860 - Final removal to Gad's Hill, Kent.
- 1867 - Public reading tour in America.

1869 - Breakdown in provincial reading tour.

1870 - Died at Gad's Hill and buried in Westminster Abbey.

Literary reputation

Charles Dickens is the most popular and internationally known of English novelists. Among popular classics, he ranks behind only the King James Bible and Shakespeare. His works have been translated into various languages, including even the Dutch and Russian, interpreted, researched and formed the centre of a thriving academic industry.

His everlasting fame rests on the prodigious gallery of characters he could invent seemingly without effort, on his powerful strength of his plots and his acute perception of human nature, enlivened by a matchless satirical humour.

In many of his novels condemnation of Victorian moral hypocrisy and injustice, the sordid exploitation of women and children, the dehumanising effect of a rapacious civilisation, misadministration of the law, were based on his own bitter boyhood experience.

The pervading sentiments appeal to passions and tastes common to the popular imagination and natural affections of mankind in every country, which have endeared countless readers.

Charles Dickens was a public instructor, a reformer, and moralist. What was good and amiable, bright and joyous in our life and nature, he loved, supported, and augmented by his writings; whatever was false, hypocritical, and vicious, he held up to ridicule, scorn, or contempt.

Dickens was also one of the earliest and most accomplished writers of the short story - a literary form which has always been popular in England.

Works

Sketches by Boz (1836-37). As a freelance journalist at the age of seventeen, Dickens began to compose fictitious sketches based on shabby-genteel moeurs in and out London.

It originally appeared as a collection of fifty-six descriptive pieces and anecdotes. Some attempt to impose order on articles that had appeared quite separately was made by grouping them, for publication in book form in 1836, into four categories: Sketches, Scenes, Characters, and Tales. Many of the leading themes, which he was to work out in future novels, are to be found here.

Sketches By Boz secured for its author immediate success and the copyright of £150. It shows Dickens's skilfulness in drawing vivid and realistic pictures of manners and episodes from London everyday life among the poor and the lower middle classes.

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club (1837). It is about the adventures of the members of the Pickwick Club, including Samuel Pickwick, Tracy Tupman, Augustus Snodgrass, and Nathaniel Winkle.

Oliver Twist (1837-39). Written when Dickens was in his twenties, the novel reflects many of the themes, which became the hallmark of his later achievements and partly the state's neglect of orphans and the poor. It is the poignant story about the orphan Oliver Twist.

He spends his unhappy early childhood in the appalling conditions of a nineteenth century English parish Workhouse. Expelled for daring to ask for more food, Oliver becomes an apprentice to an undertaker. He then runs away to London where he falls prisoner of Fagin and his gang. It is the beginning of his trials and tribulations, which come to end when he is rescued and adopted by a generous middle-class family.

Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39). Dickens started it with the intention of attacking the inhuman educational methods, which then prevailed in certain schools in Yorkshire, having himself investigated the scandal. But the story gradually became transformed while he was writing it.

Part of it is still concerned with social evils but basically it consists of a lively account of the adventures of the hero, Nicholas Nickleby, and his various encounters with a gallery of richly drawn comic characters.

It has a melodramatic plot of which the mainspring is the antagonism between Nicholas, a generous, high-spirited young man, and his grasping money-broker Uncle Ralph Nickleby.

After the death of the improvident Nicholas Nickleby senior, his widow and children Nicholas and Kate, a beautiful and pure-minded girl, are left penniless.

They accept living under the oppressive guardianship of Ralph Nickleby, a grasping usurer, and the dead Mr Nickleby's brother.

Ralph is not pleased at his nephew's independent bearing and, as a reaction, sends him to teach at Dotheboys Hall in Yorkshire, an iniquitous school. Kate is apprenticed to Madame Mantalini, a dressmaker, in order to assist in the expenses of housekeeping.

Here she is by her uncle's designs exposed to the advances of the vicious Sir Mulberry Hawk, one of his associates. She strives to defend her virgin innocence and ultimately marries the generous and warm-hearted Frank.

Nicholas finds the school a miserable place, where the master, Wackford Squeers, starves and ill-treats his pupils.

Horrified by his discovery of the treatment of the half-witted orphan Smike, Nicholas trashes the schoolmaster and sojourns briefly in London with Smike, and then goes off and joins a troupe of travelling actors led by Vincent Crummles. He thrives on commerce and marries Madeline Bray. His and his sister's happy future is a complete contrast to the destiny of Ralph Nickleby who commits suicide because he loses money, and sees his plans one after one melt into thin air.

The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-41). This novel, picaresque in form, originally serialised in 1840-41 in Dickens's weekly magazine *Master Humphrey's Clock*, was first published in volume form in 1841. The novel shows Dickens's vivid

imagination and remarkable ability to combine sentimental idyll to light comedy.

On the whole, the book is sombre in mood and only occasional light relief and the routinely happy ending, inserted in deference to middle-class sensibility, tempers the general atmosphere of gloom.

It tells of the vicissitudes of Nell Trent, better known as Little Nell, who lives with her grandfather, the owner of "curiosity shop" - a shop which sells second-hand goods of ornamental or rarity value. She was to become a favourite of the reading public as soon as she made her first appearance.

The old man is reduced to poverty by gambling and by his grasping relatives. He borrows money from Daniel Quilp, a hideous dwarf and smuggler, in the vain hope of retrieving his fortunes, for his niece's sake.

They leave the shop in the hands of Quilp and roam about the countryside as beggars. This marks the beginning of a series of journeys which bring them into contact with a group of strolling actors, the owner of a travelling waxworks show and, in due course, with a crowd of rogues, vagabonds, and paupers, whose adventures make up the liveliest pages of the novel.

They fall in the company of various travellers, including Kit Nubbles, who vainly tries to relieve their needs. They reach a village where they find some peace. The place appears to be full of dead children, and moribund ancients.

Nell and her grandfather, exhausted by all the wanderings and haunted by the fear of being discovered by Quilp, die before his brother Fred, a good-for-nothing, can meet them.

Kit Nubbles, formerly employed for some time in the curiosity shop and hopelessly in love with Nell, marries a serving maid, the quaintly named Marchioness, the pretty girl of all work. Daniel Quilp is drowned in the Thames near his wharf on the south bank while trying to evade justice.

Barnaby Rudge (1840-41). This novel is one of Dickens's two historical novels and is set at the period of the Gordon anti-popey riots of 1780, which terrorised London for several days.

The novel, which was first serialised in *Master Humphrey's Clock* and then published in book form in 1841, is in two parts, the second being most memorable as it gives vivid scenes and characters directly concerned in the Gordon Riots. The central story concerns the passionate love of Emma Haredale, whose father has been mysteriously murdered, and Edward Chester, the son of Sir John Chester. Their parents thwart their love on account of their different perspectives on religious matters.

The Gordon Riots are led by the pious Protestant Lord George Gordon and secretly fomented by Sir Lord Chester. They is a protest against removal of penalties imposed on Roman Catholics in the Catholic Relief Act of 1778.

During the riots Haredale's house is burned down and Emma carried off. Edward saves the lives of both Emma and her uncle and thus he wins Haredale's consent to his union with Emma. Haredale discovers that his steward Mr Rudge, father of the titular Barnaby Rudge, a half-witted young man, murdered his

brother Reuben. Mr Rudge and his son join the rioters, the latter being seduced by the innocent pleasure of carrying a flag and wearing a blue bow.

Barnaby is reprieved from the gallows and spends the rest of his life with his mother in a cottage near the Maypole whilst his father is hanged. Haredale eventually kills Sir Lord Chester in a duel.

The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44). First published in 20 parts from January 1843 to July 1844, this novel marks the transition from the earlier Dickens, the comic entertainer, into the later Dickens, of sombre power. Written shortly after his first visit to America, this novel is a caustic satire on some aspects of American life and specifically a bitter indignation against slavery. Despite its rather tedious chapters set in America which have proved irritant to some readers, the novel met with a favourable reception. The selfish Martin Chuzzlewit, the titular hero, is in love with Mary Graham, the girl whom his grandfather Martin Chuzzlewit, a rich man made Misanthropic by the selfishness and the greed of his family has brought up. Young Martin, forced to leave home, immigrates to America to seek his fortune. The Eden Land Corporation of Cairo, Illinois defrauds him. He, then, returns to England with little love for anything American but radically changed as a sadder and wiser young man.

The complex story concludes with Old Martin's exposure of the hypocrite Pecksniff, the "architect and land surveyor", and the happy marriage between Mary and Young Martin. Concurrently with this main theme runs the story of the avaricious Anthony, Old Martin's brother. He treats his pretty and true hearted wife Mercy Pecksniff with brutality.

He kills his father and Montague Tigg, the director of a bogus insurance company, by whom he is blackmailed and, detected, poisons himself.

A Christmas Carol (1843). It is about the rehabilitation of an old miser through the spirit of Christmas.

Dombey and Son (1846-48). In this novel Dickens criticises certain aspects of the society of his own age.

David Copperfield (1849-50). It is Dickens's most popular novel. It contains many autobiographical incidents and characters.

Bleak House (1852-53). It is a great novel in which Dickens denounces the inefficient legal system and suggests the need for its reform.

The story, set in 1852, revolves around three young people who meet for the first time in the High Court of Chancery. They are the latest victims to be caught in the monolithic court case of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce, which has dragged on for generations, breaking its claimants financially, morally, physically and mentally.

Hard Times (1854). It deals with the problems of working class and is a fierce social criticism against the public institutions.

Little Dorrit (1855-57). It is a captivating and complex story centred on the terrible living conditions in the English prisons.

A Tale of Two Cities (1859). It is one of Dickens's two historical novels, the other being *Barnaby Rudge*, and is a romance of the French Revolution.

Great Expectations (1860-61). Set in the form of an autobiography, this novel follows closely the development of the hero Pip, from his childhood to adulthood. One bleak and windy evening, 8-year-old Pip meets an escaped convict on the marshes. Shortly afterwards, he is summoned to Satis House, the derelict, gloomy home of the strange, reclusive Miss Havisham.

Pip is told he has "great expectations". At Miss Havisham's, Pip meets and falls in love with the pretty, cold-hearted Estella. But although she is cruel to him, Pip knows he will love only her.

Our Mutual Friend (1864-65). It is Charles Dickens's last completed work.

Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870). Before their deaths, the fathers of Edwin Drood and Rosa Bud have betrothed their young children to each other. But, as no real love blooms between them, Edwin treats Rosa in a casual fashion.

On the contrary, his sinister Uncle Jack Jasper, preceptor of Cloisterham Cathedral, nurses an unrequited passion for Rosa. Neville Landless, an exotic newcomer to Cloisterham, is attracted to Rosa. Edwin disappears and suspicion, actively fostered by Jasper, falls on his enemy Neville. He is arrested but is soon released untried, as the body of Edwin is not found. Shunned by his friends, he moves to London where he hides himself as a student. In the meantime, Rosa flees to London in the care of Mr Grewgious, her eccentric, good-hearted guardian, to escape Jasper's attentions. Aided by the amiable clergyman Crisparkle, Mr Datchery, a mysterious stranger, and Mr Tartar, a retired naval officer, Mr Grewgious is ready to defend Rosa from Jasper.

The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club

First published: in 20 monthly parts April 1836-November 1837, and as a volume in 1837

Fictional time: nineteenth century

Literary genre: novel

Type of plot: social criticism

Setting: England

Main characters:

Samuel Pickwick, general chairman of the Pickwick Club; he is kind and good-tempered and thinks well of everyone; he is sometime thought of as a typical Victorian English gentleman

Sam Weller, his servant

Mrs Bardell, Pickwick's landlady

Tracy Tupman, Augustus Snodgrass, and Nathaniel Winkle, Members of the club

Alfred Jingle, a strolling player

Job Trotter, his servant

Mr Wardle, the hospitable owner of Manor Farm, Dingley Dell

Isabella and Emily, his two daughters

Rachel Wardle, their aunt

Joe, the "Fat Boy" Mr Wardle's servant

Bob Sawyer and Ben Allen, two medical students

Arabella Allen, Ben Allen's sister who Winkle and Bob have fallen in love with

Mary, a pretty housemaid, who Sam has fallen in love with

General introduction

Widely regarded as one of the most famous and accomplished of all pre-Victorian novels, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* secured Dickens a foothold in the fiction and a financial success since its very first instalments.

Originally serialised in twenty monthly numbers, from April 1836 to November 1837, the year which hailed its publication in book form, this picaresque novel displays an exuberant sense of fantasy, skilfully interwoven with more human elements inspired by the author's own early experiences in the streets of London.

The book has no moral implications and develops no regular story, but consists of a random succession of episodes loosely linked with one another chiefly by the fact that the protagonists are all members of the same club.

The characters are brilliantly outlined with a matchless humorous and farcical vein to be entered the popular consciousness of any reader of English literature.

Moreover, the wide range of social issues, including the awful treatment of prisoners, legal abuses make the novel timeless and topical.

The episodes are predominantly comic and Samuel Pickwick seems at first to be intended as a mere figure of fun, destined always to be made a butt of comic adventures owing to his kindness, benevolence and extreme innocence of the ways of the world.

It is fortunate for him that he acquires the cheerful and practical Sam Weller who keeps him out of most of these troubles, or comforts him with words of wisdom when the trouble has not been avoided. With the resourceful servant, Pickwick earns dignity and shows positive moral qualities, such as a determination to stand by the values of truth and justice.

With the immortal Sam Weller, Tracy Tupman, a lovelorn bachelor, Augustus Snodgrass, an aspiring romantic poet of modest talents and Nathaniel Winkle, a would-be sportsman, he gives rise to a long series of amusing adventures during some journeys through the southern counties of England.

As said, it is pointless to attempt a detailed summary of this entertaining book, but two themes recur. The first is the appearance, at interval, of the glib strolling player Alfred Jingle, who lives by his wit and his cool nerve and his rascally servant Job Trotter. He complicates the lives of the club members. The other

consists of the various love affairs in which the four friends find themselves, willingly or unwittingly involved.

But the most famous and prolonged episode is the lawsuit for breach of promise brought against Mr. Pickwick by the irate landlady Mrs. Bardell.

The prosecution gives Dickens the chance to satirise the court procedures, which he had witnessed during his apprenticeship as a shorthand reporter.

Summary

The Pickwick Club as a body makes an early and brief appearance, at one of its London meetings. Thereafter the central figures of the book are its President, the middle-aged, stout, jovial, and naïf Samuel Pickwick, a retired gentleman who sets out on a tour of investigation of scientific and cultural matters, and the three friends who accompany him: Nathaniel Winkle, who fancies himself as a sportsman but fails dismally to justify his pretensions; Augustus Snodgrass, melancholy and romantic in the fashionable Byronic manner (the period of the story is 1827-31); and the somewhat older Tracy Tupman, a plump bachelor amorist.

Their first adventure occurs at Rochester, where the cowardly Winkle is mistakenly challenged to a duel, the real offending party being Alfred Jingle, a strolling player. Jingle joins the party; it is the first of his mischievous appearances in Mr. Pickwick's life.

At a military review in Chatham the Pickwickians meet Mr. Wardle, a country squire, his daughters Bella and Emily, his spinster sister Rachael, and their servant Joe, an immensely fat and greedy youth with a tendency to sleep on his feet. An invitation from Wardle takes the party down to his Kentish manor at Dingley Dell, where the unfortunate Winkle, taken out shooting, misses his bird and shoots Tupman in the arm. Rachael Wardle, on the lookout for a husband, evinces great emotion at the incident, and a romantic association springs up between her and Tupman. But Jingle, who has again come on the scene, cuts out Tupman and elopes with Rachael to London, where Wardle and Pickwick find the pair about to marry by special licence. Jingle is bribed to abandon Rachael.

At the White Hart Inn, Borough, where the couple are staying, Pickwick meets the lively young Cockney Sam Weller, self-taught, voluble, and irrepressible, who is working as Boots. Pickwick decides to take Sam into his service as valet and servant; but his attempts to announce this to his landlady, the widowed Mrs. Bardell, are interpreted by that lady as a proposal of marriage to herself, and the other three Pickwickians arrive to see her fainting in the horrified Pickwick's arms.

They travel on to Eatanswill and witness the humours of an election. Once more Jingle appears, this time masquerading as a captain. Pickwick follows him to Bury St. Edmunds, proposing to unmask him. With the aid of his servant, the lugubrious Job Trotter, Jingle entices Pickwick into the grounds of a girls' boarding-school by night. Pickwick's intentions are gravely misunderstood by the teachers and pupils.

After a pleasant visit to Dingley Dell, the Pickwickians return to London and Pickwick is disturbed to learn that Mrs. Bardell, under the influence of the rascally lawyers Dodson and Fogg, has instituted an action for breach of promise against him. He journeys to Ipswich, where at the Great White Horse he finds himself by mistake in the bedroom of a lady just about to become engaged to the jealous Mr. Peter Magnus, who challenges him to a duel. The lady reports them to the magistrate Nupkins, but Pickwick clears his name and incidentally finds that Jingle is in Ipswich attempting to marry Miss Nupkins under false pretences. Pickwick unmasks him, and with his friends returns for a happy visit to Dingley Dell, enjoying country sports and pastimes and attending the wedding of Bella Wardle to Mr. Trundle.

Other romantic affairs are on hand: Winkle is in love with Arabella Allen, a friend of Emily Wardle, with whom Snodgrass is infatuated. Arabella's brother Ben, a medical student, turns up at Dingley Dell with his friend Bob Sawyer, also a suitor for Emily's hand.

There follows the hearing of the Bardell and Pickwick breach of promise case. Pickwick's defence is shattered by the inept testimony of Winkle and the eloquence of Mrs. Bardell's counsel, Serjeant Buzfuz. Mrs. Bardell is awarded £750 damages, which Pickwick refuses to pay. He takes refuge from his troubles at Bath, where he experiences the niceties of spa society. Sam attends a "swarry" of snobbish footmen, and Mr. Winkle is seriously compromised by being found at midnight, clad only in his nightshirt, with the pretty Mrs. Dowler in her sedan-chair. Pickwick and Sam rescue him, and he meets Arabella Allen once again in Bristol. Sam Weller falls in love with Mary, a pretty housemaid.

Again in London, Pickwick is imprisoned in the Fleet for non-payment of damages. Sam gets himself imprisoned to remain in company with his master by a trick worked with his father, Tony Weller, a stout coachman who has married a widow addicted: pay and tea-drinking in the company of the Reverend Mr Stiggins, a hypocritical drunken parson.

In the Fleet Pickwick meets again Jingle and Trotter, penniless, starving, and distressed. He befriends them generously and obtains their release and a passage to Australia where they may stir a new life. Mrs. Bardell arrives in the Fleet, sent there by Dodson and Fogg for non-payment of costs. Pickwick pays the costs for her on condition tin; z: agrees to forgo his damages.

His final adventures are all connected with romance. Winkle has secretly married Arabella, and Pickwick reconciles both Winkle's father and Ben Allen to the match. Snodgrass and Emily Wardle are bent on elopement, because of Wardle's attitude to their engagement, but Pickwick brings father and daughter together and all misunderstanding are sorted out.

The Pickwick Club is dissolved. Pickwick retires a neat villa in Dulwich, with Sam and Man as his servants; they, too, marry. Tony Weller is now a widower, and has at last taken his revenge upon Reverend Mr. Stiggins by ducking him in a horse-trough.

Oliver Twist

First published: 1837-1839

Fictional time: early nineteenth century

Literary genre: novel

Type of plot: sentimental romance

Setting: the dark and narrow streets of London

Main characters:

Oliver Twist, a young orphan. A victim of cruel poverty at the mercy of fate

Mr Bumble, the meddling and corrupt man in charge of the Workhouse

Mrs Bumble, the Workhouse matron

Jew Fagin, the head of the gang of thieves

Bill Sikes, a burglar, his confederate

Nancy, a thief who takes pity on Oliver

The Artful Dodger, another confederate

Mr Brownlow, Oliver's benevolent benefactor

Monks (Edward Leeford), a sinister person who turns out to be Oliver's half-brother

Mrs Maylie, who behaves in a friendly way towards Oliver

Rose Maylie, her niece

General introduction

Dickens wrote this novel in his twenties starting the series of the so-called "sentimental novels", which reached the climax in *David Copperfield*. It was first published in *Bentley's Miscellany* from January 1837 to January 1838 and then in book form under the pseudonym of Boz.

The master of escapist literature, Dickens was suddenly transformed into the bold denunciator of social evils in this book. In this case he attacks Malthus's principles of rationalising population control and Poor Laws of 1834, which virtually forced poor family into the Workhouse or into a life of crime.

The Workhouse was a house or an institution provided by parish authorities, for the poor to live when they had no employment or were too old to work in return for unskilled labour. Conditions were very bad and people were very afraid of having to go there.

It focuses on the Slums and Workhouse hard living conditions and on the London underworld and juvenile crime in an effort to improve the poor people's plight.

Summary

The story opens when the wronged mother, Agnes, worn and exhausted from a long, painful journey on foot, is found unconscious by the roadside. She is carried to the only place of refuge for such as she seems to be.

In the lying-in room of the almshouse she dies in childbirth without revealing her name. The only proof of the boy's identity, a locket and ring, kept even at the

price of starvation, are stolen from the corpse before it is cold by the old crone who is in attendance.

It is Mr. Bumble, the harsh beadle - a parish council official - who invents Oliver's surname Twist, simply because in his alphabetical system of naming orphans he has reached the letter T.

Mr. Bumble is the representative of the Board and is always seen in company with his cocked hat and his cane - emblems, also, of authority.

The children live on a measly sum paid by the parish and the rations are so meagre that they scrape their bowls so hard they never need washing.

They grow hungrier and hungrier until, nearly-starvation, they decide that Oliver must ask for an extra bowl of food. So that night he nervously asks "Please, sir, I want some more."

The master turns pale with fury and asks Oliver to repeat his question, and then he severely punishes for his troubles. He is put in solitary confinement and an advertisement is pasted up offering £5 to anyone who will take him off their hands.

The administrators eventually send him to Mr. Sowerberry, the local coffin-maker and undertaker. Oliver is given a bed under the coffin workshop counter.

Mr. Sowerberry is pleased with his new assistant's sad face and trains him to walk in the procession at children's funerals.

He soon he quarrels with Noah Claypole, a bullying boy, who also works for the undertaker. The cruelty and unhappiness he experiences there induce him to run away to London, after tying up his few possessions in a handkerchief.

On the way to London, he happens to meet a boy who introduces himself as Jack Dawkins, otherwise known as the Artful Dodger. He appears to be a precocious lad dressed up in the clothes and manners of a remarkably knowing man.

Physically and mentally wretched, Oliver gladly follows him through the narrow streets to a filthy room. He becomes mixed up with in a gang of thieves, whose teacher is Fagin, an old Jew, and including the brutal burglar, Bill Sikes. Fagin's sinister quality is reinforced by the peculiar fact that his various hideouts are always to be found at the top of labyrinthine flights of unlit stairs. The next day, the Dodger turns up with his friend Charley Bates and they jokingly teach Oliver to pick Fagin's pockets. Oliver is sent out to work with Charley Bates and the Dodger. They saunter through the streets till the Dodger spots an old gentleman at a bookstall.

Only as the Dodger plunges his hand into the man's pocket pulls out a handkerchief and then takes to his heels, does Oliver realise the nature of Fagin's work.

On his first venture into petty crime, accompanied by the more experienced Dodger and Charley Bates, the blameless but terrified Oliver is caught and taken in front of a magistrate.

His innocence is established in the court only when the bookseller, who saw everything, arrives to clear Oliver's name.

The benevolent Mr. Brownlow, the man whose pocket Oliver is accused of having picked, takes Oliver home with him, putting him in the charge of his housekeeper.

There Mr. Brownlow is startled to notice the resemblance between Oliver and a portrait he has of a pretty young woman.

Fagin's gang hunt for Oliver, the Jew insisting that he should not be allowed to remain in liberty because he knows too much of their criminal exploits. One day Oliver is sent on an errand with a £5 note to put his character to the test. Mr. Grimwig believes Oliver will run off with the money and never be seen again, instead Mr. Brownlow has trust in Oliver's honesty.

But by a cruel stroke of fate, he is spotted and kidnapped by Bill Sikes and Nancy, a generous hearted prostitute, and carried off, back to Fagin's house, while Mr. Brownlow and his friend wait on patiently.

Nancy, seeing the boy's fear and panic, feels sorry for him. Sikes is a coarse and brutal burglar whose only semblance of a redeeming feature is a kind of affection for his dog.

Early next morning, Oliver is detailed to help Sikes and Toby Crackit burgle Mrs. Maylie's house in Chertsey West of London. Two men appear in the doorway and Sikes and Toby manage to escape but the hapless Oliver lays wounded by gunshot in a ditch.

He is cared for by the owner of the house and her adopted niece Rose, to whom he relates his story, finding them understanding and compassionate.

Again Fagin chases the poor lad this time helped by Monks, an ominous figure who has plans to establish alibis for making Oliver a common criminal and thereby getting him hanged.

Accordingly, he gives money to Fagin to lead Oliver into a life of crime and vice. Nancy overhears the conversation between Monks and Fagin and, in atonement for her wrongdoings, reveals it to Oliver and Rose.

She tells Rose that the Monks has secured by clever inquiry and bribery, the locket and the ring, of Oliver's origins that Monks wants to suppress and of her ties of kinship with Oliver.

Rejecting all Rose's efforts to place her in some safe refuge from her horrible associates, and refusing all rewards, the weeping girl returns to the only life she has ever known.

Dodger has been caught thieving and is to be transported to Australia. Nancy pays dearly for her unselfishness. Sikes, enraged by Fagin's revelation of her apparent treachery, brutally murders her.

Soon after the murder, a horrible but celebrated incident in the novel, Sikes leaves the city but he is continuously haunted by Nancy's ghost and eventually he decides to return to London and hide there. At the gang's headquarter, he learns that Fagin has been arrested and that the police are hot on his heels for murder. He finds on the rooftops in his hopeless escape arrest.

Fagin is duly tried and hanged. Monks is investigated by Mr. Brownlow and at last, threatened with exposure, he confesses his evil motives.

He explains that an old friend of Mr. Brownlow's, Edward Leeford, had two partners - Monks was the child of his miserable marriage, and Oliver was the child of Rose Maylie's sister, the woman he loved.

Thus Monk has acted for his ruin so that he could retain the whole of Leeford's small estate. When Leeford died he left Mr. Brownlow a picture of Oliver's mother and it was this portrait's close resemblance to Oliver that aroused Monks is exposed and forced to emigrate to America, where he ends his life in prison.

Only Charley Bates learns from the past events and gives up crime to become a farmer. Mrs. Corney, a rich widow and the matron of the Workhouse and Mr. Bumble are now married, end up being sent to the Workhouse. By contrast, Oliver may start a promising life of happiness and bliss in the future as Mr. Brownlow's adopted son.

A Christmas Carol

First published: 1843

Fictional time: early nineteenth century

Literary genre: short story

Type of plot: sentimental romance

Setting: England

Main characters:

Ebenezer Scrooge, a grasping, disagreeable businessman

Fred, his nephew

Bob Cratchit, his clerk

Tiny Tim, his little crippled son

The ghost of Jacob Marley, Scrooge's former partner

The ghost of Christmas Past, a figure like both a child and an old man

The ghost of Christmas Present, an ample, jolly giant

The ghost Yet To Come, a tall silent figure

General introduction

A Christmas Carol is the opening story of Dickens's collection of Christmas Books he began to write in 1843.

When they were first collected he wrote in the preface that he saw them as "a whimsical kind of masque intended to awaken loving and forbearing thoughts". The appeal of Christmas to Dickens was very strong and this, combined with the period taste for the supernatural, resulted in some excellent short works, including *A Christmas Carol*, which increased his popularity.

The first and most famous of his popular short Christmas stories, it was initially a financial disappointment but has since become children's favourite. Its popularity has continually been increased by stage, radio, and television versions to become an integral part of Christmas holidays throughout the English-speaking world.

In a mixture of realism and fantasy, consideration and compassion for the poor are the dominant themes. It also represents entertainingly Dickens's celebration

of the virtues associated with Christmas. He represented these virtues as the cure for the puritan narrowness of feeling and inhumanity of outlook which were the dark side of Victorian commerce.

If its story is rather sentimental, it redeems itself with a wealth of memorable characters and with rich language in a storytelling style full of wit and vivid metaphor.

Summary

It tells about Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge, wealthy but callous “a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone”, owner of the firm *Scrooge and Marley* in London. He is a bad-tempered miser whose lack of feeling for his fellow humans is evident when, one holiday, he refuses to contribute to a fund for Christmas food for the poor and scornfully answers his nephew’s good wishes of the season with, “Bah!” in his scornful rejection of Christmas as “humbug”.

On Christmas eve when he approaches his gloomy house, he sees in the knocker the face of Jacob Marley, his business partner, died seven years before. Startled but refusing to be dismayed, he enters, double-locks the door, and is eating his evening bowl of weak gruel when Marley’s ghost appears coming through the closed door, dragging a great chain made of money boxes and ledgers.

This uninvited guest warns Scrooge that he will be haunted by three spirits without whose visits he cannot avoid the endless wanderings now inflicted upon Marley himself.

The trio consist of *The Ghost of Christmas Past*, *The Ghost of Christmas Present*, and *The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come*.

As the clock finishes striking midnight, the first spirit appears, a figure like both a child and an old man, wearing a crown from which springs a jet of light and carrying an extinguisher, like a cap, under its arm. It takes scrooge to scenes from his earlier life.

Two are at his old school, the first when he is a lonely boy deserted there at Christmas, comforted only by the characters from books he is reading, and later when he is almost a young man and is fetched by his sister, little Fan, his father having relented and allowed him to come home for the holiday.

The next is a festive occasion at the business where he is apprenticed, a dance given by Old Fezziwig. The last two are with Belle, the girl to whom he was engaged, when she says that she has been replaced in his heart by a golden idol and she releases him from his promise, and years later, when her husband tells her he has been Scrooge, quite alone in the world, working on the night his partner is dying.

The second spirit, the ghost of Christmas Present, is an ample, jolly giant dressed in a robe of green trimmed with white fur and wearing a wreath of holly. The spirit takes him through the streets, both rich and poor, where people are rejoicing, and then to the house of his underpaid clerk, Mr. Bob Cratchit where the large family is preparing dinner and Bob comes in from church, carrying his little crippled son, Tiny Tim, on his shoulder.

Despite a rather small goose and pudding, they have a joyous time, the only sour note coming when Bob proposes a toast to "Mr. Scrooge, the Founder of the Feast," and the family responds with a trace of bitterness. Next they go to the home of Scrooge's nephew, Fred, and his pretty wife, where a group is playing parlour games with such zest that Scrooge enters into the game, unseen and unheard. Before he disappears, the ghost reveals two emaciated children clinging beneath his robe, the boy Ignorance and the girl Want.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come is a tall, silent figure shrouded in a black garment. Without speaking, he leads Scrooge through the business district, where he overhears a couple of conversations regarding a recent death that obviously causes no grief to the speakers. From there they go to a foul, wretched part of town where three people, a charwoman, a laundress, and an undertaker's man, sell the possessions, bedclothes, and even the shirt that they have scavenged from the dead man's rooms to a junk dealer.

When Scrooge asks if there is no one who shows emotion at this death, the spirit takes him to a young couple for whom the death gives them a reprieve from a foreclosure and who cannot help feeling happiness.

When he begs the spirit to show him some tenderness at a death, he is taken again to the Cratchit home, where the family is bravely trying to bear up after their loss of Tiny Tim.

Before the ghost parts from him, Scrooge is escorted to a churchyard, where he sees a neglected stone bearing the name Ebenezer Scrooge. He pleads with the ghost to say that these are necessarily images of what will happen, only of what might happen, and as he grasps the spirit in entreaty, he finds he is holding his own bedpost.

The spirits show Scrooge the festive happiness that he was once able to enjoy but can no longer recapture, the contentment experienced even by the poorest and humblest families, and the terrors that the future holds for him if he does not mend his ways.

On awakening on Christmas morning, Scrooge resolves to be a philanthropist and celebrates by sending the biggest goose to the Cratchit family. He then goes to church and walks about the streets and, coming upon the men to whom he rudely refused a contribution for the poor the day before, insists on making a very generous donation.

Although he must whip up his courage, he then goes to his nephew's house, apologises for his former attitude, and accepts the invitation to dinner, which he scorned before.

The next morning he sets a trap for Bob Cratchit, catches him coming in late, pretends severity, and announces that he plans to raise his salary and help his struggling family. He is as good as his word, becomes like a second father to Tiny Tim, and keeps Christmas in the true spirit ever after.

Dombey and Son

First published: in 20 monthly parts (October 1847 to April 1848)

Fictional time: early nineteenth century

Literary genre: novel

Type of plot: sentimental romance

Setting: London

Main characters:

Mr Paul Dombey, head of the shipping house of *Dombey and Son*

Florence, his daughter

Paul, his delicate and dreamy son

Walter Gay, a good-hearted youth in Dombey's employment and Florence's future husband

Edith Granger, the young widow whom Mr Dombey marries after his wife's death

Caker, Dombey's manager

Solomon Gills, the nautical instrument-maker and uncle of Gay

Cuttle, the genial old sea-captain

Susan Nipper, Florence's devoted servant

Toots, the innocent and humble advisor of Florence

General introduction

This novel, whose full title is "Dealings with the Firm of Dombey and Son, Retail, Wholesale and for Exportation", marks the great turning point of Dickens's artistic career. With it, he departs forever from the picaresque world of his earlier novels, in which only individual villainy had marred the landscape of life.

In it for the first time Dickens envisions evil as inherent in the very structure of his society and gives unified form to this vision in all its scope, depth, and complexity.

He launched a series of novels whose plots are more carefully controlled and in which his attacks on Victorian society, and in particular on its unhealthy interest in money-making are more bitter than elsewhere.

Set in an England caught in the throes of industrial revolution and commercial expansion, Dickens's purpose here is to analyse pride and to illustrate its strengths and weakness through the psychological exploration of Mr. Dombey, the central character.

As a whole, *Dombey and Son* stands as a memorable indictment of a corrosive economic system, and as a profound plea for human values.

Summary

Mr. Paul Dombey is a stern, wealthy and loveless London merchant, whose sole interest in his life is the perpetuation of his name in connection with his shipping house *Dombey and Son*.

His god is wealth and his own ambition is to have a son. On his son Paul's birth, his whole heart is in him, and even his wife's death is but a small matter. Paul is a sensitive, prematurely old child, quite unfit to the great things expected of him.

A man of little imagination and no real love, Dombey sends his son to Dr Blimber's school, where the strenuous discipline proves too much for him. Dombey centres all his ambitions and hopes on Paul and neglects his deeply affectionate and amiable daughter Florence.

Deprived of motherly affection and physically delicate, Paul dies in childhood. In his short life, he wins the love of all who know him. His death is one of the famous passages of fiction. During his last days, he is haunted by the sea and is always wondering what the wild waves are saying.

In the meantime, Florence falls in love with Walter Gay, a good-hearted youth who works on her father's old-fashioned business. In order to prevent Florence from marrying Walter, a mere clerk in his firm, Dombey sends him on business to an unhealthy colony in the West Indies. Walter is shipwrecked on the way and believed to have been drowned.

Dombey marries Edith Granger, a proud, penniless young widow. The marriage proves loveless and childless and Edith soon finds that her husband is a man deserving of no respect or warmth and finally runs away with James Carker, the manager of Dombey's business - one of Dickens's most notorious villains.

They leave for France, leaving Dombey with his pride shattered and his wealth lost.

One day Carker meets Dombey in a railway station and falls in front of a train and is killed - a particular interest of the book is that railways play an important part in it just as the time when they were transforming English life.

In the meantime, Florence, who hungers to be loved, but her father has no love to bestow on her, has married Walter, who has survived the shipwreck. Dombey's ensuing mental and physical decline parallels his business difficulties.

Estranged from his friends, Dombey plunges into the bleakest despair, which is partly relieved by his forgiving daughter's love and his son-in-law.

David Copperfield

First published: 1849-1850

Fictional time: early nineteenth century

Literary genre: fictional autobiography

Type of plot: sentimental romance

Setting: Blunderstone, Yarmouth, London, Dover, Canterbury

Main characters:

David Copperfield, the central character who pours out all his moving childhood memories with real wit Clara Copperfield, his genteel mother

Miss Betsey Trotwood, an austere but kind-hearted lady; David's great-aunt

Clara Peggotty, servant to Mrs Copperfield, a devoted nurse and friend to David

Mr Dan Peggotty, her brother

Little Emily, the niece and adopted daughter of Mr Peggotty

Ham, his orphan nephew

Mr Edward Murdstone, David's fearsomely unsympathetic stepfather

Mrs Jane Murdstone, his sister, a “dragon”
James Steerforth and Tommy Traddles, David’s friends
Mr Creakle, an ignorant and ferocious schoolmaster of Salem House
Mrs Creakle, a quiet woman, ill-treated by her husband
Mr Wilkins Micawber, the generous and happy-go-lucky man, whose portrait is inspired by Dickens’ own father
Mrs Emma Micawber, his wife
Miss Emma Micawber, her daughter
Mr Wickfield, Miss Betsy Trotwood’s solicitor
Agnes Wickfield, his beautiful daughter
Uriah Heep, a greedy odious clerk in the office of Mr Wickfield
Mr Spenlow, David’s employer in London
Miss Dora Spenlow, his beautiful but empty-headed daughter who marries David Copperfield
Richard Babley (“Mr Dick”), a harmless lunatic
Miss Betsy’s protégé
Martha Endell, Emily’s friend and rescuer

General introduction

Dickens’s eight novel, full title of which is *The personal History, Adventures, Experience and Observation of David Copperfield* is an unchallenged masterpiece.

As was common practice at the time, Charles Dickens published it in twenty monthly instalments, which he collected into a single-volume edition in 1850.

In this book the comic and romantic elements are beautifully balanced and fused, here Dickens condemns certain evils of 19-th century English society such as child labour and cruelty in schools.

The comic concerns both people (not by chance is Micawber one of the most memorable comic characters in English literature) and situations (for example the scene where David is confused and cheated by the waiter).

The dramatisation of the wide gallery of characters and circumstances moves the reader to tears by its sympathetic realistic effects. This amply explains why this novel is one of the most widely read and loved pieces of fiction in the English language.

Though not the richest and deepest of Dickens’s novels, it is perhaps psychologically the most revealing, both of Dickens himself and of the society of his time. He preferred to analyse the inner life of his various characters with all their problems and emotions rather than developing a reliable plot.

Dickens provided a fitting introduction to the 1869 edition in which among other things he wrote “Of all my books I like this best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent of every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them; but, like many fond parents I have in my heart of my hearts a favourite child, and his name is David Copperfield”.

He was probably influenced by the fact that the hero is representative of Dickens himself with his boyhood hardship, sad experiences, even down to the inverted initials of the names.

By no chance he tells his own story in the first person, beginning from the moment of his birth, six months after his father's death.

The social landscape of *David Copperfield* is broader than an autobiography would be likely to achieve. In fact, Dickens's purpose was to present an imaginative picture of growth from childhood to manhood in his own period of history, using his own experience as some of its material but without intending a mere biographical record.

Some reviewers attempted by cursory examination to maintain that some details of the novel, though "woven up and blended together", are unusual or at least nugatory to the development of the main plot.

On the contrary, if we make a thorough study we realise that this technique is not a blemish because Dickens tried to meet the current taste of the reading public and above all his aim was to show a deep insight into the psychology of his characters.

In accordance with a sentimental conclusion, there is a clear distinction between the virtuous who are rewarded and the wicked, who are punished.

Even though a bare outline of the novel follows, the sub-plots and various coincidences unite the whole.

Summary

The novel opens with the birth of its hero, David Copperfield at Blunderstone Rectory, a village in the south of England, six months after his father's death.

His weird great-aunt, Betsy Trotwood, is intensely indignant at Doctor Chillip's news that the new-born child is a boy who can never bear her name.

As the only son, David spends the first years of his life happily doted on by his gentle but weak-willed mother Clara and her motherly and protective servant, Peggotty. But his happy days come to an end when his mother marries Mr. Murdstone, who turns out to be interested only in her estate.

On his mother's wedding-day, David, now six is sent with Peggotty on holiday to great Yarmouth, on the East Coast of England. There David meets Mr. Peggotty, a bachelor fisherman who looks after his stalwart young nephew Ham and his niece-cum-adopted daughter Little Emily. Young David lives in tranquillity with them and is childishly attracted by Emily's engaging ways.

When he returns home, Peggotty is replaced by the harsh and loveless sister, Jane Murdstone, who plays the role of cruel stepmother. His step-father, a hard, unscrupulous and callously person, locks him in his room to teach him a lesson.

David proves recalcitrant, rebels against his stepfather's harsh treatment and even bites him. As a punishment, Mr. Murdstone sends him away to Salem House, a boarding school near London. Here things go from bad to worse for the sadistic and domineering schoolmaster, Mr. Creakle is always ready to whip his pupils.

Furthermore, many of Dickens's companions bully him but he finds protection from James Steerforth, a good-looking youth born to dominate other and from Tommy Traddles, a sweet optimistic and cheerful boy whose favourite pastime is drawing skeletons.

The joy arousing from this new friendship is suddenly curtailed by the news of his mother and her baby's death as a result of Mr. Murdstone's continuous vexations. Peggotty is sacked and shortly thereafter marries Barkis, the stagecoach driver.

After a brief holiday at Mr. Peggotty's, the young orphan, now aged ten, is sent to work in a London factory where the job is to wash and label wine bottles in Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse, infested by rats. Life for the little boy becomes unbearable because of humiliation and overwork.

He is introduced to the impecunious Mr. Wilkins Micawber, a commercial traveller that enjoys life and does not worry about the future, which he blindly believes will bring something better. Micawber rents David a room in the small, humble house where he lives with his wife and children.

When Micawber is imprisoned for having failed to meet some financial obligations, David is left practically homeless and gives himself up to darker despair.

On his release, Micawber moves to Plymouth with his family, hoping that "something will turn up" there. The departure of Micawber and the worsening of his own situation induce David to leave his soul-destroying job. After a disastrous journey of seventy miles, he arrives in Dover at the house of his great-aunt Miss Betsey Trotwood, who rejected him at birth because he was a boy.

Moved by his pitiful story, the eccentric and warm-hearted old woman offers him a tender welcome and takes him for a period in which David lives peacefully. When Mr. Murdstone turns up to reclaim his stepson, she sends him packing with amazing vehemence. Thanks to her, David can resume his conventional schooling in a much better school at Canterbury where he lodges the lawyer Wickfield, his great-aunt's old friend, and strikes up a friendship with his lovely daughter Agnes.

David meets Uriah Heep, Mr. Wickfield's clerk, an unctuous man, whose grovelling and hypocritical humility fills him with loathing and disdain even whilst he arouses some pity when he relates his unhappy childhood.

After graduating with honours, David works as an apprentice proctor and enters the office of Spenlow and Jorkins. He at once falls head-over-heels in love with the flirtatious Dora, Mr. Spenlow's attractive but empty-headed daughter. She returns his affection and often meets him against her father's advice.

In the meantime, Peggotty's husband is dying and David goes to visit him with his old schoolfellow Steerforth, now a student at Oxford. At Great Yarmouth the engagement of Emily, the precious treasure of her old uncle's heart, to Ham, a brave and dependable young man, is being celebrated. Steerforth is overcome by the girl's beauty and persuades her to elope with him, much to everybody's amazement.

David searches in vain for Emily and her seducer, coming up against steely hostility from Steerforth's mother. This implacable woman vows never to accept

a mere fisherman's daughter as a wife for her son and threatens to disown James if he refuses to abandon her.

Grief-stricken, Mr. Peggotty after an anxious and long-lasting quest, meets her, seduced and forlorn. The sub-plot reaches its climax when, in a shipwreck, Steerforth drowns and with him Ham, in his heart-breaking attempt to save him.

David has left his law firm and is now working as secretary to his former Canterbury schoolmaster, Dr Strong.

On Mr. Spenlow's death, David marries the impractical Dora and finds success as a parliamentary reporter, also to help his great-aunt because she has been ruined financially.

Their union, at first idyllic, quickly deteriorates. Dora is charming but is incapable of managing a household and dealing with life's problems effectively. David, however, continues to treat her with unlimited patience and consideration.

Her strength gradually wanes and eventually she dies after losing a child. On her deathbed she advises him to marry his faithful friend Agnes Wickfield. Meanwhile the sly Uriah has deprived Mr. Wickfield of his partnership.

After virtually turning Mr. Wickfield out into the street, he impudently tries to seduce Agnes.

On a trip to Canterbury David meets Mr. Micawber works as Uriah Heep's confidential secretary. He tells him that his employer has been stealing money from Mr. Wickfield and is consequently responsible for Betsy Trotwood's financial decline. He has never revealed this sad truth, as he lends him money and so he is under blackmail.

Thanks to the assistance of the trustworthy Traddles, now a lawyer, Uriah is exposed as a forgery and a thief and compelled to give his money back to Betsy and to Mr. Wickfield. Betsy offers Mr. Micawber help to ease his financial difficulties.

Mr. Daniel Peggotty with his niece Emily and Mrs. Gummidge is found prospering in Australia, where the incurable optimist Micawber, having failed in every adventure in the old country, relieved of his debts, appears as a much-esteemed colonial magistrate.

Shaken by a series of calamities, David goes abroad for three years and while away slowly realises that he has always loved Agnes. When he returns home, he gladly marries her. He establishes his reputation as a successful writer. They start a new life with Aunt Betsey and Peggotty looking after their children.

Bleak House

First published: in 20 monthly parts (from March 1852 to September 1853)

Fictional time: 19th century

Literary genre: novel

Type of plot: social criticism

Setting: London

Main characters:

Richard Carstone, a futile youth

Ada Clare, his amiable cousin
John Jarndyce, their elderly relative
Esther Summerson (Hawdon), Ada's companion, a supposed orphan, and part-narrator of the story
Sir Leicester Dedlock, baronet, an honourable and unimaginative old man
Lady Dedlock, his wife, who hides a secret about her past
Hortense, her French maid
Captain Hawdon, nicknamed "Nemo", her former lover and Esther's secret father
Tulkinghorn, a cunning old lawyer
Jo "Toughy", a wretched and a simple-minded crossing-sweeper
Bucket, an Inspector
Allan Woodcourt, a young doctor, whom Esther loves
Harold Skimpole, the parasitic man of letters; he disguises his utter selfishness under an assumption of childish irresponsibility
Turveydrop, the self-styled model of fashionable deportment
Krook, an illiterate and eccentric old-rag-and-bottle merchant who dies of spontaneous combustion
Mrs Jellaby, her main concern is for the natives of a distant continent, to the neglect of her own family

General introduction

Bleak House, perhaps the most technically correct of all Dickens's achievements, first appeared in twenty monthly instalments, which ran from March 1852, through September 1853, the last two numbers being issued together. Dickens completed this novel at the Château des Moulineaux, which he had rented near Boulogne, in France.

Set in London, shrouded by thick enveloping fog and misty clouds, the novel is a merciless indictment of the English legal system, called the High Court of Chancery whose officials are in cahoots with the fiddlers and tricksters and whose delays and consequent increasing costs lead many petitioners ultimately to ruin and hardship.

It is Dickens's first successful effort to integrate a gallery of characters from all classes, a long list of social and political problems into one single view of society.

Fog, disease and the lust for money are symbols of social and moral breakdown in Dickens's contemporary society.

Two contrasted narrators share the telling of the story: the savagely sardonic but impersonal author who uses the present tense, and the ingenuous girl, Esther Summerson.

The lawsuit of "Jarndyce and Jarndyce" was based on an actual case centring on a Birmingham millionaire, William Jennings. The character of Skimpole is partly based on Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), and another character, Boythorn, on Walter Landor (1775-1864).

The bleakness of the story is smoothed away by the happy romance between Esther Summerson, who is supposed to be partly the narrator of the story, and Woodcourt, a young doctor.

The story centres on the interminable suit of "Jarndyce and Jarndyce" in the High Court Chancery, concerned the distribution of an estate. Lawyers argue the case year after year, as if the law was invented so that they could make a comfortable living.

Summary

The two young orphan distant relatives, Richard Carstone and Ada Clare, are "wards in Chancery" - legally under the care of the Lord Chancellor - while the distribution of an estate to which they have claims is endlessly disputed in the Court of chancery (the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce). They are adopted by their kind elderly relative John Jarndyce.

Esther Summerson, one of the two narrators of the story is an unresentful girl. She gives an account of her lonely and unhappy childhood. She is ignorant of her parentage, though she knows that she is illegitimate. She was brought up by Miss Barbary, her godmother and aunt, a grave, strict person who never smiled.

On her death, Esther was sent to Greenleaf, a select boarding school near Reading, run by the twin Miss Donnys. She spent six years there before she acted as a companion to a Ward of Court and she was received into Mr. Jarndyce's house.

Mr. John Jarndyce made this arrangement through his legal adviser Mr. Kenge. He grows to love Esther, who is many years, his junior.

Lady Dedlock, one of the claimants in the case, is the beautiful and silent young wife of Sir Leicester Dedlock. He is a simple-minded but self-important landowner, whose one redeeming feature is his devotion to his wife, who is some twenty years younger. The case is about a will and the administration of the trusts. Generations of lawyers, however, have managed to reduce legatees to poverty and misery.

Lady Dedlock hides a dreadful secret: before she married her present husband, she had loved a certain Captain Hawdon, alias Nemo, and had become the mother of a daughter, Esther Summerson, or rather Esther Hawdon. She believed that Captain Hawdon was dead at sea and her child, too, when she married Dedlock.

The coldly calculating lawyer Tulkinghorn has slowly discovered this fact and blackmails Lady Dedlock by threatening to expose it to her husband. Before he can expose Lady Dedlock, he is found shot dead by Inspector Bucket, who soon arrests Mademoiselle Hortense, Lady Dedlock's French waiting woman for the murder. Hortense detests her mistress and is pleased to help the old lawyer uncover the mystery also because she expects him to find some new employment. When she realises that Tulkinghorn treats her haughtily and with contempt, she kills him.

But anonymous letters accuse Lady Dedlock of the deed. Although Sir Leicester in fact behaves with compassion and understanding when he learns her secret from Inspector Bucket, she flies from the house in despair.

Later she is found dead by Esther and Mr. Bucket at the rusty iron gate of the repulsive burial-ground where her former lover lies, and whose archway is swept by Jo, alias "Toughey".

Actually, Captain Hawdon has worked as a nameless scrivener and died in destitution and misery, presumably of an overdose of opium. He had no friends except Jo who had unknowingly provided Tulkinghorn with all the documents and proofs to discover the mystery.

In the meantime Richard has married Ada in secret and is living, ill and anxious at Symond's Inn. He optimistically waits for a positive end to the entangled suit and becomes idle and shiftless, despite his guardian tries to dispel such any illusions.

The suit draws to the end with no lucky heir as the protracted and costly processes of the law swallow up the disputed estate. Richard, now fully aware of his mistake, sinks gradually to ruin and death, while her wife Ada and her baby son, Richard, stay with Mr. Jarndyce.

Esther rejects the proposal of marriage of Mr. Guppy, a young clerk at Kenge and Carboy's. Instead, she falls in love with Allan Woodcourt, a young doctor gentleman, but her sense of gratitude and devotion to John Jarndyce is so strong that she accepts the latter's proposal of marriage.

John Jarndyce gallantly permits Esther to marry Allan Woodcourt, who looks after the dying Jo and will work among poor people in Yorkshire. John Jarndyce builds a new house, called Bleak House, where Esther and Allan go to live.

Hard Times

First published: 1854

Fictional time: early nineteenth century

Literary genre: novel

Type of plot: social criticism

Setting: Coketown, an English northern industrial city

Main characters:

Thomas Gradgrind, an influential citizen of Coketown, who believes in facts and statistics

Louisa Gradgrind, his eldest daughter

Tom Gradgrind, his son

Mr Josia Bounderby, Louisa's husband and a rich man

James Harthouse, an unscrupulous and ambitious young man

Stephen Blackpool, an honest workman

Sissy Jupe, deserted by her father

Mr Sleary, the owner of a circus

Mrs Sparsit, Bounderby's malevolent housekeeper

General introduction

If an interest in social issues is apparent a great deal in Dickens's earlier works it became the leitmotiv in *Hard Times*.

Dickens planned it as an exposure of the main flaws in the fabric of mid-Victorian society: its materialism, its greed, its selfishness, its ruthlessly competitive spirit.

He shows how the major social and economic evils in his age are a natural consequence of a disastrously misguided educational system. It dehumanises its students and damages them morally and emotionally, making them unfit to deal with the human problems of an industrial society.

In the very first lines, Mr. Gradgrind, the chief advocate of utilitarianism in the novel, defines education as teaching boys and girls "nothing but Facts", on the basis that "nothing else will ever be of any service to them". In his worship of hard solid facts, he has nothing but contempt for such abstractions as conscience, moral sense, love, affection and imagination.

His obsession with factual knowledge as the sum total of education is emphasised by the use of "facts" and "facts" ten times in the first short chapter.

He wants to exclude even the most innocent leisure activities from his children's lives and is furious when they momentarily abandon their useful studies and visit a circus.

Dickens uses the working-man Stephen Blackpool, a victim of Gradgrind-Bounderby system, to express his own view on the marriage issue. He stresses the patent injustice of a legal system which makes divorce possible for those who can afford to pay for it, but which offers no such facility to the poor.

Dickens has nothing to offer by way of a solution to the social problem beyond pious hopes for a radical change of heart on the part of the employers, and patience and forbearance on the part of the workers. This becomes clear towards the end of the novel, when he allows the "dying Stephen to articulate his own aspirations for a better society".

Since its serialised publication in Dickens's Weekly Magazine *Household Words* from 1 April to 12 August 1854, the novel has been at the centre field of controversial criticism.

Thomas Babington Macaulay, politician and historian, wrote in 1854: "One excessively touching, heart-breaking passage and the rest sullen Socialism. The evils which he attacks he caricatures grossly, and with little humour".

However that may be, it is now considered a masterpiece of English literature and universally read and loved.

Summary

Mr. Thomas Gradgrind, a retired wholesale hardware merchant, lives in Coketown, an imaginary hideous industrial town, where he has established a model school, which is minutely depicted in the opening chapter.

As the follower of the bare principles of utilitarian theory, he stubbornly believes in the absolute dominance of facts over feelings and emotion and

accordingly education should be merely practical and hence factual, allowing no place for imagination or emotion and affection.

He puts John Stuart Mill's utilitarian philosophy into practice both in bringing up his two children Louisa and Tom and in the building and furnishing his house, Stone Lodge, either.

In the school, children are regarded as a vessel into which Mr. M'Choakumchild - his name suggests the suffocation of children with factual knowledge - will pour facts until all are full to the brim.

One day, after an official meeting with the local school authority, Mr. Gradgrind happens to catch Louise and Tom, peeping in at the travelling circus Sleary's Horse-riding. He blames them, scorns and frowns disapproval of the place as frivolous and wasteful, a world representing the triumph of fancy and triviality over mere fact and over the intense and unrelenting pursuit of knowledge.

His close friend Mr. Josiah Bounderby, equally devoid of sentiment, is a banker and cotton prince, a self-made man who never tires of reminding everybody of his humble, disadvantaged childhood.

He is a bachelor and the elderly Lady Mrs. Sparsit, a widow formerly of noble lineage, presides over his household.

The two friends set out to meet the pupil Sissy Jupe's father in order to persuade him to remove his daughter from his model school as she may have been responsible for leading Louisa and Tom astray.

At "Sleary's Horsemanship", they learn that the ailing Mr. Jupe ran away the previous night. Struck with compassion, Mr. Gradgrind decides to take Sissy into his household and provide for her education, but on condition that she breaks all connection with the circus people.

Chapter V introduces the industrial town of Coketown, where most of the events in the novel take place. It is a mid-Victorian slum, which is evoked, in all its bleak horror and in its power to stunt and maim the minds and bodies of those who are doomed to live and work in it.

Sissy does not have an easy time and takes "the smallest conceivable interest in its exact measurements; ... she was extremely slow in the acquisition of dates...".

Meanwhile Tom has become, under the influence of his upbringing, callous, unscrupulous and meanly calculating. He is eager to find a job, enjoys life to compensate for a repressed childhood. Accordingly, he urges his sister Louise to marry Bounderby despite the disparity in their ages (she is twenty and he is fifty) to win his employer's indulgence.

In Chapter X, we meet the forty-year-old Stephen Blackpool, a rather stooping man with a "peck of trouble". He is a good power-loom weaver at Bounderby's mill, and a man of perfect uprightness.

He is burdened with a drunken and dissolute wife, from whom he has been separated for many years. He is the innocent partner in this hopelessly-broken marriage and is involved in a platonic love-affair with the virtuous Rachael, his fellow worker.

He is in despair when he learns that divorce costs "a mint of money" and therefore only the rich can afford it. He leaves his employer's house, where he

has gone to ask for advice, and directs his steps homewards, where he gloomily enters and sees Rachael bringing help to his wife who is wounded and bruised.

During the night, Rachael foils her friend's attempt to poison herself.

Mr. Gradgrind, now Member of Parliament for the industrial constituency of Coketown, arranges a loveless marriage between his daughter Louise and Mr. Bounderby. The cynicism engendered by her father's treatment and the desire to please her brother, her only true outlet for her emotional life, influence her in the choice. Her decision to marry Bounderby arouses wonder, pity, sorrow and doubt in her intimate friend Sissy.

Tom, now placed in Bounderby's bank, has become hypocritical, self-centred and totally lacking in self-discipline. He is even boastful to see his sister simply as a sacrificial victim to his own selfish whims, a mere means of getting out of Bounderby everything that will make life easy for himself. He has been borrowing large sums of money from Louisa to pay his gambling debts.

Shortly after the hasty wedding, the newly married couple honeymoon in Lyon where Bounderby can take the opportunity of seeing how the "hands" get on in those parts.

On their return Mrs. Sparsit moves into the new apartment at the Bank, furnished with many comforts. With her there are a deaf serving-woman and Bitzer, who acts as the general spy and informer in Bounderby's Bank. He was the model student at Mr. Gradgrind's schools, entirely devoted to the pursuit of the fact, to his own interests, and to rational calculation.

In the meantime, Mr. James Harthouse, a well-bred and languid man of fashion, comes to Coketown on political business with no ideology but the pursuit of social advancement.

He shows himself to be a sheer self-seeking opportunist and concerned only to find amusement in a place with no other charms. He takes advantage of Louisa's unhappy married life and tries to seduce her after being told by Tom that his sister "didn't marry old Bounderby for her own sake, or for his sake, but for my [his] sake".

Ostracised by all his fellow workmen, Stephen Blackpool refuses to accept the trade-union standpoint and henceforth he falls into "the loneliest of lives, the life of solitude among a familiar crowd".

At last he is dismissed as a result of a confused debate with his employer. In desperate straits, he leaves the town and finds a new job under a false name, at a working colony, sixty miles away.

Now and then a mysterious old lady, Mrs. Pegler, visits Coketown to pick up news of Mr. Bounderby and is content to hear that he is enjoying good health.

One night the Bank is robbed of 150 pounds and the suspicion falls upon Stephen because he has been seen in the neighbourhood at night. Mr. Bounderby interrupts the investigations as he has to go way on urgent business, which he expects, will take three or four days.

Louise, whose marriage is a complete failure, is nearly seduced by James. Mrs. Sparsit, who is by now so consumed with a desire to witness the ruin of Louisa that she devotes all her time and energy keeping "unwinking watch" on her victim's movements.

In her husband's absence, Louise meets him in secret but she does not feel like accepting his advances and flees to her father for protection. She also confronts him with the appalling consequences for her of the education and training to which he has subjected her from infancy.

Harthouse determines to abandon both all-further interest in Louisa and his career in Coketown. He leaves the place for Egypt never to return.

On his return, Bounderby has decided that Stephen is guilty for the robbery and erects a placard offering a reward of twenty pounds for apprehension.

The indefatigable Mrs. Sparsit suspects that Mrs. Pegler is an accomplice in the robbery and produces her at Mr. Bounderby's house.

Bounderby is horrified to be confronted by the woman who turns out to be his mother. In so saying she destroys his pride, his moral and his reputation as a "rags-to-riches" model of success. Her son finds her innocent of the charge and allows her to live with him.

Mrs. Sparsit undergoes further humiliation at the hands of her angry employer and resolves to go to live with the peevish, tormenting lady Scadgers, one of her relatives.

On a bright Sunday in Autumn, Sissy and Rachael, who believe in Stephen's innocence, find Stephen's hat near a disused mine-shaft, and Stephen himself at the bottom of the shaft, seriously injured. With his dying breath, he asks Gradgrind to clear his name, hinting that Tom, his son, can tell him how

Mrs. Sparsit, intent on malice, finds the so-called Mrs. Pegler, whom Stephen has met outside Bounderby's house. She proves to be Bounderby's unacknowledged mother, whose very existence contradicts all his fabrications about his hard, sordid childhood, deserted and thrown on the world by his mother as a baby. Bounderby is deflated.

Gradgrind learns from Louisa and Sissy that Tom was the bank-robber, and that he is hiding with Sleary's Circus. They find him there, and Sleary disguises him as a circus performer. His escape is nearly foiled by the spying of Bitzer, but Sleary and his accomplished horse and dog effect Tom's flight.

Tom dies abroad, sending a loving and penitent message to Louisa from his death-bed. Louisa does not re-marry, but matures into the woman she might have been earlier but for her harsh rearing. Rachael remains single and faithful to Stephen's memory, but Sissy marries.

Gradgrind lives into old age to realise that his educational philosophy based exclusively on utility and materialism, has been a complete failure, ruined his daughter's happiness and turned his son into a criminal.

Little Dorrit

First published: 1855-57, in 20 monthly parts

Fictional time: mid-1820s

Literary genre: novel

Type of plot: social criticism

Setting: England

Main characters:

William Dorrit, The father of the Marshalsea prison
Amy (Little Dorrit), his youngest daughter
Fanny, her snobbish sister and a theatrical dancer
Tip, their scapegrace brother
Arthur Clennam, William and Amy's friend
Mrs Clennam, his supposed mother
Flintwinch, a villain
Rigaud (Blandois), a stagy villain
Pancks, a rent-collector
Merdle, a swindling financier
Daniel Doyce, an engineer
Christopher Casby, a dishonest person; the father of Flora, Arthur's first love
John Chivery, the young man who loves Amy Dorrit

General introduction

Dickens worked on *Little Dorrit* between January 1855 and May 1857 and, following his usual practice, he published it twenty parts in nineteen months, the last being a double number.

Little Dorrit, which was originally to have been called *Nobody's Fault*, is often regarded as Dickens's finest work both in dramatic impressiveness and in richness of psychological insight.

Through a captivating story, in which Dickens exploits his first-hand experience in his youth - his father had been confined in Marshalsea prison for many years - the author presents a compelling picture of the miseries of debtors' prisons and the absurdities of the 19th century middle-class society, dominated as it is by the commonly held myth of money.

Particularly memorable is the witty satire on the Ministry of Circumlocution Office of the day, with their incompetent and obstructive officials who have no thought of serving people, but use the departments to serve themselves, with no question in their minds that could possibly be in error.

The nation itself is under imprisoning control of this Government Department, which exists to gratify the interests of the enormous Barnacle family.

The story, which contains dramatic scenes, develops in abrupt shifts back in time but in the end the events ingeniously begin to overlap.

The salient feature is the contrast between poverty and wealth and the different ways the characters react to reversal of fortune. Another contrast running throughout the novel is between goodness and wickedness: the first exemplified by Little Dorrit and Arthur Clennam, the second by Rigaud and Merdle.

It is a hard task to summarise *Little Dorrit* as it is a mystery story, in which many incidents, relationships among the characters are not explained until near the end. Therefore, for clarity's sake, some of those explanations are anticipated.

Summary

The titular *Little Dorrit* is Amy, the diminutive youngest child of William Dorrit. Together with her sister Fanny and brother Edward, she was born and brought up among in the dark, narrow, and airless Marshalsea prison - opened in the 13th century in Southwark, London and closed in 1849 - where her father is imprisoned for debts arising from a partnership.

There is a hierarchy within the prison, and it is up this meaningless social ladder that Dorrit mounts, to the great detriment of his spirit. When the oldest turnkey dies, he himself becomes the longest-serving inhabitant of the prison: the Father of the Marshalsea, which gives him a spurious social prestige.

For William Dorrit, whatever he may be to the Marshalsea, is a poor father to his own children. Weak, dependent, essentially childish, he affects not to know that Fanny supports herself by dancing and that Little Dorrit goes forth each morning, earns a subsistence for herself and self-seeking family by sewing in the homes of various ladies and returns to the prison at night.

Mrs. Clennam, a gloomy, bigoted woman and Emy's employer, has a son, Arthur Clennam, who has just returned in London from the east. He meets Emy and is immediately attracted by her optimism and courage. He believes that the Dorrits have been victimised by the commercial interests of his own family and, to make her happy, he intends to get her father released from the Marshalsea, but finds it impossible to trace his creditors through the Ministry of Circumlocution.

Emy nourishes the same deep passion for him but she has no courage to ask him to marry her, as he is middle-aged.

With the help of one Rugg, and young John Chivery, who has long been in love with Amy, a certain Pucks investigates the Dorrit family. He proves that William Dorrit is the inheritor of a large estate, which raises the family to richness and allows him to leave the prison after serving twenty-three years.

His efforts are crowned with success, and he proves that old Dorrit has an inheritance, which raises his family to affluence.

William and his family are constricted by social ambition under the guidance of Mrs. General who instructs them in a fashionable way. Only Little Dorrit is unchanged. Her resilient optimism, generosity and humility are unaffected by the social aspirations of her sister and brother.

The scene when William leaves the prison is one of Dickens's great set-pieces. A banquet is held for the wretches remaining behind; the sometimes father of the Marshalsea passes among them benevolently; and amidst their plaudits, he leaves in procession with his whole family - with the exception of Little Dorrit, who has fainted in the midst of the excitement.

In the meantime Mr. Dorrit has great plans, which may include marriage to General, but disgraces himself at Merdle's dinner through a tragic delusion that he is still in prison. Once again dependent on Little Dorrit, he soon dies, followed by his brother Frederick.

Fanny marries Edward Sparkler, step-son of the banker Merdle. We have no information about Merdle's origins, the extent of his enterprises, or even their

nature. We know for certain that he is the financier of reputedly enormous wealth. He becomes prisoner of his false position, he commits suicide, leaving a trail of forgery and robbery, which will ruin thousands of investors and innocent bystanders.

Arthur Clennam, who has helped the Dorrits while fighting his own battles with bureaucracy, is among the ruined, and is imprisoned in the "Old room" in the Marshalsea.

Sick and despairing, he is tenderly nursed and consoled by Little Dorrit, who declares her love to him and offers him her own fortune. Arthur proudly refuses her money and her love, owing to the reversal circumstances.

At this moment, Flora Finching, Casby's daughter and Arthur's former sweetheart, arrives and comically but sincerely resigns her hopes for Arthur.

With the main theme is wound the thread of an elaborate mystery. Arthur has long suspected that his mother, the puritanical, paralysed mistress of a crumbling and mysterious house, has done some wrong to Little Dorrit.

Hovering around this circle is the scoundrel Blandois, who has appeared at the beginning of the book under the name of Rigaud. This individual, who has managed to get out of the Marshalsea where he has been imprisoned on suspicion of killing his wife, exerts an influence over Mrs. Clennam.

He tells how Mrs. Clennam is not Arthur's mother and that she has suppressed a codicil of a will that would have left sufficient money to Dorrit's brother, or, in the event of his death, to his niece, Little Dorrit, to allow for the release of the old man from the Marshalsea prison. Mrs. Clennam does not know who Little Dorrit is or of her own hidden connection with Amy.

Thus the major strand of the plot is not uncovered until late in the novel, and the letters D. N. F. take on an even more poignant significance, since they refer specifically to the codicil.

Greatly distressed, Mrs. Clennam overcomes her hysterical paralysis, leaves her bed and hurries to the Marshalsea. There she throws herself on the mercy of Little Dorrit, and takes a clean breast of the increasingly tortuous web of intrigue that has gathered around her original suppression of the will.

She has destroyed this will because Dorrit's brother was the protector of a dancing girl whom the man thought by the world to be her husband had married secretly. She persuades Emy to visit Blandois with her in an attempt to put a stop to his blackmailing activities. While they are on the way to the old Clennam house, the building suddenly collapses, burying the villain in the rubble.

Little Dorrit, who has remained devoted to him, refuses to be separated from Arthur, who is now restored to health, and especially now that there is no financial barrier to restrain him: all her father's money was lost in the Merdle crash. Thanks to the generosity of his friend Doyce and the banker Meagles, Arthur is released from prison.

Also freed from the family shadow, Arthur is at last sure of his destiny and marries Little Dorrit. The prison chaplain celebrates the marriage service in the Marshalsea, in the presence of their friends.