Charles Dickens

1812- 1870

* Born February 7, 1812 on the island of Portsea, Portsmouth, England; died June 9, 1870 in Gadshill, Kent.
* Son of John Dickens, a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, and Elizabeth (Barrow) Dickens. The second of eight children.
* John Dickens was transferred from Portsea to London and three years later moved to Chatham, where Charles, after learning the rudiments of English and Latin from his mother, attended a school run by a Baptist minister.
* Winter of 1822, the Dickens family returned to London. Charles spent many happy hours exploring the streets which were later to figure prominently in his novels.
* John Dickens was unable to meet his mounting debts. Mrs. Dickens tried to supplement her husband’s yearly income by opening a private school for small children, but failed to get any pupils. It soon become necessary to sell the family’s small library of eighteenth-century fiction, which had had an important influence on the future novelist.
* Two days after his twelfth birthday, Charles went to work at a blacking warehouse.

(At the age of 12, thanks to his father’s bankruptcy, Dickens found himself working in a rat-infested warehouse that produced bottles of liquid shoe polish. The work itself probably lasted for no more than a year, but it left scars on his imagination that never properly healed. His rage at social injustice, his sensitivity to the fate of abandoned children, his never-satisfied hunger for financial and emotional security: all this can be traced back to his time sticking labels onto bottles of Warren’s blacking. So can the routines he adopted to tame life’s mess and confusion. He would whip out a comb whenever a hair was out of place, conducted regular inspections of his children’s bedrooms, and rearranged the furniture when he stayed in hotels, so that everything was always in its proper place.

In his writing, too, Dickens sought to create order out of chaos. His sprawling plots were carefully parceled out in weekly or monthly installments. His bulging lists of characters were allowed to run riot across the page, but were eventually tied down to the standard fates of fictional Victorians: marriage, exile, death.)

* On February 20, 1824, his father was imprisoned for debt where Mrs. Dickens and six of the children joined him shortly. Still being paid by the civil service, they lived more comfortably than for some months past.
* Released from prison May 28, 1824 after inheriting a small legacy on the death of his mother, Dickens’ father found employment as a reporter for the *British Press.* He was never able to keep out of financial difficulties, and in later life, required continuous support from his famous son.
* After nearly three years at Wellington House Academy, Charles left school to take a job as office boy for the law firm of Ellis and Blackmore. In 1828 he became a free-lance reporter in the law courts of Doctor’s Commons; during his spare time he read at the British Museum and studied shorthand.
* Between 1829 and 1832, he carried on a romance with Maria Beadnell, whom he later characterized as Dora in *David Copperfield.* When he met her again in 1855, he was completely disillusioned in his youthful vision of her charm.
* In 1832 he thought of going on stage, but an illness prevented him from appearing for the audition arranged for him.
* In the spring of 1832 he became a general reporter for the *True Sun*.
* In 1833 he published his first work of fiction serialized in the December issue of *Monthly Magazine*. He continued writing sketches for this publication, adopting in August 1834, the signature of Boz, derived from his younger brother Augustus’ nasal pronunciation of Moses, the nickname Dickens had given him. More sketches appeared in various magazines and in February, 1836, all of these short pieces were collected and published as *Sketches by Boz.*
* On April 2, 1836, soon after beginning the serially published *Pickwick Papers,* Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, eldest daughter of the editor of the *Evening Chronicle* and music critic.
* Disturbed by the loss of income resulting from the pirating of his works in America, Dickens, accompanied by his wife, sailed for Boston on January 4, 1842. He endured the discomforts of early traveling conditions to visit parts of New England, the Middle Atlantic States, the South, and the North Central states.
* December 1843, appeared the immortal *Christmas Carol.* The first of his Christmas books, it was followed by for others.
* 1856: Dickens had realized one of his early dreams, the purchase of Gad’s Hill Place, the imposing house which he had admired during his boyhood at Chatham. But growing domestic unhappiness marred the enjoyment of his new home and brought periods of restlessness, which he tried to offset by a strenuous program of public appearances. Finally, in 1858, he and his wife agreed to a legal separation. Mrs. Dickens’ sister, Georgina Hogarth, who had joined the family as a girl in 1842, thereafter managed the Dickens household until the novelist’s death.
* April 30, 1859: *A Tale of Two Cities*: to assure the success of the new magazine, *All the Year Round,* Dickens began the first number of a series, which appeared until November 26th. Set in London and Paris, at a time of the French Revolution, this novel delineates the social evils culminating in the conflict between the aristocracy and the lower classes. Though showing Dickens’ growing skill in pot construction, it is the least typical of his works in that it concentrates on situations instead of characterization.
* A few hours after finishing the sixth serial of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood,* Dickens collapsed in the dining room of his beloved Gad’s Hill and died the following morning, June 9th. Though he had requested a simple grave near his last home, public demand resulted in his burial at Westminster Abbey.

Critique of Charles Dickens

* Critical opinion is divided as to Dickens’ place in literature. Those who disparage him point to his improvised plots with their indebtedness to the farce, melodrama, and spectacle of the nineteenth-century stage; to the characters with their idiosyncrasies and ludicrous exaggeration; to the pathos with its descent to sentimentality, even mawkishness. His defenders, while admitting the structural weaknesses of his early novels, maintain that his later words show a marked development in craftsmanship. They admit also his fondness for caricature, but add that he produced some unforgettable pen portraits. While aware of his emotionalism, his supporters show that many of his contemporaries applauded a tale if it moved them to tears.
* The genius of his invention, recognized even by his most outspoken detractors, produced a steady flow of novels, stories, and occasional pieces that have enjoyed a continuing popularity, not only in England and America, but on the Continent as well.
* Dickens success stems from an absorbing interest in the problems of the middle and lower classes. Out of the awareness of man’s suffering sprang his vehement attacks on the social evils of his day. Repeatedly he endorsed reforms which would assure a happier and healthier people.