

# Great Expectations

PREISS MURPHY  
School Publishers

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# Great Expectations

## Introduction

### Dickens's Biography

Born to a poor family on February 7<sup>th</sup>, 1812, in Portsmouth, Charles Dickens was the second of eight children. His father, John Dickens, was a naval clerk who dreamed of striking it rich while his mother, Elizabeth Barrow, hoped to be a teacher and school director. In 1816, they moved to Chatham, Kent, where young Charles spent the years that shaped his character and he and his siblings were free to roam the countryside and explore everything around. This period came to an end when in 1822, the Dickens family moved to Camden Town, a poor neighborhood in London. Although his father was a kind and pleasant man, he had a dangerous habit of living beyond the family's means; so huge debts started accumulating and the family's financial situation worsened. Eventually, John was sent to a debt prison in 1824, and Dickens' mother moved his brothers and sisters into prison with their father. His father's brief period in the Navy Pay Office gave Charles a few years of private education, first at a dame-school<sup>1</sup>, and then at a school run by William Giles, a dissenter.<sup>2</sup> As to Charles, he was forced to leave school

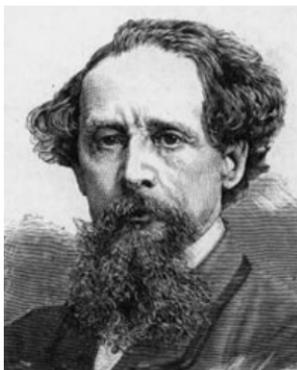


Illustration by Fred Bernard of Dickens at work in a boot-blacking factory after his father was sent to prison. published in the 1892 edition of Forster's Life of Dickens

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1- a school in which the basics of reading and writing were taught by a woman in her own home.  
2- a non- conformist, one who differs in opinions with others.

and work at a boot-blackening factory where he earned six shillings a week. His job was to paste labels on pots of “blacking” which is a substance manufactured to make a black pigment for products. Dickens found the three months he spent apart from his family highly traumatic. Not only was the job itself depressing, but he considered himself too good for it, the matter which made the other children scorn him. In retrospect, Dickens considered this experience marking the end of his youthful innocence and wondered “how he could be so easily cast away at such a young age.” He felt abandoned and betrayed instead of being taken care of. These feelings became a recurring theme in his writings. Also the exhausting and often cruel working conditions left an everlasting impression on him which again influenced his writings and became the origin of his interest in the reform of socio-economic and labour conditions.

After his father was released from prison, Dickens was allowed to go back to school though his mother did not immediately remove him from the factory, the matter which affected him deeply. Dickens wrote “I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back”. However, in 1827, Dickens had to drop out of school again to work as an office boy at a law office to help support his family. Then, having learned shorthand in his free time, he became a freelance reporter. He reported the legal proceedings at the law courts of London. In 1830, Dickens met Maria Beadnell and fell in love with her but her parents disapproved of him and ended the relationship by sending her to school in Paris. She was thought to have been the model for the character “Dora” in David Copperfield.

In 1832, at age of 20, Dickens was full of enthusiasm but wasn't clear as to what he wanted to do. All he knew was that he wanted to be famous. He was interested in mimicry<sup>1</sup> and popular entertainment and was attracted to theatre. Dickens used to be an avid reader. He sometimes read at the attic where his mother kept precious books or at the British Museum's library. He read for authors such as Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, and Oliver Goldsmith and studied acting at the same time. Together with his siblings, he played games of make-believe, gave recitations of poetry, sang songs, and created theatrical productions, which aroused in Dickens a love for theatre. In the same year, Dickens managed to secure himself an acting audition at Covent Garden, for which he prepared carefully but missed because of a cold which ended his hopes for a career on the stage.

In 1833, he submitted his first story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk" to the **Monthly Magazine**. Then soon, he became a political journalist, reporting on parliamentary debate and travelling across Britain to cover election campaigns. Evidently, the job became an early starting point for his writing career. He wrote a collection of stories entitled, *Sketches by Boz*, Boz being his nickname that he used as a pseudonym<sup>2</sup> for some years.



Catherine Hogarth Dickens, 1938

In 1836 the serial publication of *The Pickwick Papers* was very successful and was published as Dickens's his first novel when he was only twenty-five.

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1-imitation  
2- false name

After *The Pickwick Papers* he began writing *Oliver Twist*. *Oliver Twist*, published in 1838, became one of Dickens's better known stories most likely because it was the first Victorian novel with a child protagonist. During all that period, Dickens's father was arrested again for debts and Charles bailed him out. And for many years later both his parents as well as some of his siblings resorted to him for financial aid.



Ellen Ternan, 1858

Dickens's success caught the attention of Catherine Hogarth, daughter of the editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, whom he married in 1836. She gave him ten children before they got separated in 1858.

In 1836, Dickens's younger brother Frederick and Catherine's 17-year-old sister, Mary, moved in with them. Dickens became very attached to Mary, and she died in his arms after a brief illness in 1837. His grief for her interrupted the writing of *Oliver Twist* for several months.

However, later after Mary's death the Dickens and his wife travelled to different parts of England for holiday and left their children with another sister of Catherine's, Georgiana, who remained with them as a housekeeper, organizer, adviser and friend even after their separation until Dickens died in 1870.

In late November 1851, Dickens moved into Tavistock House where he got engaged in amateur theatre. He wrote, directed, and acted in many productions at home with his children and friends, often donating the money raised from ticket sales to those in need. During this period, Dickens wrote *Bleak House* (1852 - 1853), *Hard Times* (1854), and then *Little Dorrit* (1855 - 1857).

He still kept in touch with the theatre. He acted in *The Frozen Deep* (1857) with the actress Ellen Ternan whom he fell deeply in love with.

Dickens was then 45 and Ternan was 18. A year later he took the decision to separate from his wife, which was against Victorian convention, since divorce was not allowed especially for someone as famous as he was. After being separated from her husband, Catherine took one child with her, and left the others behind to be brought up by her sister Georgina. The relationship between Dickens and Ternan lasted for the rest of his life. The extent of the affair between the two remains speculative, but Dickens's daughter, Kate, claims that they had a son who died in infancy. After his death, Dickens left Ternan an allowance that made her an independent woman.

At the time when Dickens met Ternan, he was widely read in Europe and in 1858 he set off on a tour of public readings. A year later he founded his second weekly journal *All the Year Round*, (1858 -1870) the first being *Household Words* (1830 -1859). The same year *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) was first serialised followed by *Great Expectations* (1860 - 1861) then *Our Mutual Friend* (1864 - 1865).

Between 1868 and 1869 during a series of “farewell readings” in England, Scotland, and Ireland, he experienced fits of paralysis and collapsed on 22 April 1869 and upon the doctor’s advice, the tour was cancelled. When he regained his strength, he started working on his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*,

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1870. On 8 June 1870, Dickens suffered another stroke at his home, after a whole day working on *Edwin Drood*. He didn't gain consciousness and the next day, he died and he never completed it.

Dickens was laid in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey. A printed epitaph circulated at the time of the funeral reads:

**"TO THE MEMORY OF CHARLES DICKENS (ENGLAND'S MOST POPULAR AUTHOR) WHO DIED AT HIS RESIDENCE, HIGHAM, NEAR ROCHESTER, KENT, 9 JUNE 1870, AGED 58 YEARS. HE WAS A SYMPATHIZER WITH THE POOR, THE SUFFERING, AND THE OPPRESSED; AND BY HIS DEATH, ONE OF ENGLAND'S GREATEST WRITERS IS LOST TO THE WORLD."**

"Dickens's works have never gone out of print, and have been adapted continuously for the screen since the invention of cinema, with at least 200 motion pictures and TV adaptations. Many of his works were adapted for the stage during his own lifetime and as early as 1913, a silent film of *The Pickwick Papers* was made."

### **About Dickens's Work and Literary Style**

Though Dickens had no formal education, he was influenced by the 18th century novels he found at home. Also the fables of *The Arabian Nights* had a powerful literary impact on him. His impoverishment was a driving

Charles Dickens published over a dozen major novels, a large number of short stories (including a number of Christmas-themed stories), a handful of plays, and several non-fiction books. Dickens's novels were initially serialized in weekly and monthly magazines, then reprinted in standard book formats

force to success. Within a few years after publishing his first book, Dickens became very famous. His novels that were published in monthly or weekly installments, pioneered the serial publication of narrative, which became the prevalent Victorian mode. This episodic writing style allowed him to assess his audience's reaction, and he

often adjusted the plot according to those reactions, as was the case with some of his novels. The ending of *Great Expectations*, for one, was altered. His friend Forster had reviewed his drafts, reduced the intensity of melodramatic exaggerations, cut long passages, and made suggestions about plot and character.

Dickens was admired for his humour, satire and keen observation of character. In fact, satire is one of his greatest gifts. In his attempt to humorously depict British aristocratic snobbery, he calls one character the “Noble Refrigerator”. He compares orphans to stocks and shares, people to tug boats, and dinner-party guests to furniture. Dickens chose for his characters capturing names that would echo with associations in the minds of his readers. To list one of numerous examples, the name Murdstone in *David Copperfield* calls up references to “murder” and “stony coldness”.

### **Dickens as a Social Critic**

Dickens’s novels were a kind of social commentary. He was a fierce critic of poverty. He criticized the dreadful working conditions, long working hours and poor pay at the time and he shed light on the miserable life of the forgotten and the disadvantaged and how they were exploited and oppressed. He condemned the public officials and institutions that allowed such abuses to exist. He fought for children’s rights, education and other social reform. He had a hand in changing public opinion towards class inequalities that existed in the stratification of the Victorian society.

Karl Marx said that Dickens ...“issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together”. George Bernard Shaw even remarked that *Great Expectations* was more rebellious than Marx’s own book *Das Kapital*.