Literary Lives: Charles Dickens

Acclaimed as one of the greatest authors in the English language, Charles Dickens wrote over a dozen novels as well as many short stories, essays and sketches. A leading figure of Victorian England, he became an international celebrity during his lifetime, touring America and Europe giving talks and readings. He has been the subject of many biographies, his image has appeared on bank notes and stamps, and his characters are some of the most recognised in literature.

Childhood Trauma

Born in 1812 in Portsmouth, Charles John Huffam Dickens was one of eight children born to John and Elizabeth Dickens. The family moved to Chatham in Kent when Charles was four. For the first few years of his life, Charles was very happy; he attended a private school and read outside during his free time.

Dickens' mother initially refused to allow him to leave his job at the factory. It was only after almost a year of gruelling work that Charles was permitted to return to school to complete his education.

In 1822, the family were forced to move back to London as part of John Dickens' work as a Naval Pay Clerk. Once established in Camden, the family's lives quickly took a turn for the worse; debts which had started to build up in Kent suddenly became insurmountable. Shortly after arriving in the capital, Charles, then aged 12, was removed from school and sent to work for ten hours a day at a boot blacking factory.

A few months later, the family's money situation worsened and John was sent to Marshalsea Debtors' Prison in 1824. These prisons were quite common at the time: people owing money were put behind bars until they paid off their debts. It was also quite usual for men to take their families with them, so Charles' mother and six younger siblings joined John in Marshalsea. Charles, however, was sent to lodge with a family friend in Camden. For a young boy who had had a relatively idyllic childhood up to this point, this experience was profoundly traumatic. The shame of his father's incarceration and the misery of the factory work stayed with Dickens throughout his life.



After only a few months in prison, John was able to pay off his debts thanks to a legacy from a relative, and he was released. Dickens' mother initially refused to allow him to leave his job at the factory. It was only after almost a year of gruelling work that Charles was permitted to return to school to complete his education.

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Finding Work

On leaving school, Charles found work as a junior clerk for a firm of lawyers. While there he studied shorthand and eventually became good enough at this skill to seek a job as a journalist. He started out reporting on law cases, then moved on to covering parliamentary debates. This work fuelled his love of writing; he also started writing sketches (short descriptive pieces), the best of which were later compiled in a collection called 'Sketches by Boz', published in 1836. Boz was his family nickname which he used as a pseudonym in his early career.

That same year, Dickens began releasing 'The Pickwick Papers', his first novel, in serial form. Although it was not immediately popular, the introduction of the character of Sam Weller in a later instalment saw a turn in the publication's fortunes and helped to establish Dickens as a well-known writer. When this serialisation came to an end, after 19 instalments Charles immediately began writing 'Oliver Twist', one of his most famous novels about the adventures of a young orphan boy in London. Also released in instalments, the novel was a great success and reportedly enjoyed by Queen Victoria herself.

Dickens swiftly became a highly-regarded author and celebrity in his own right.

The serial format was not unlike the soap operas of today; people would wait for the next instalment of a story and become highly invested in the characters and plot. Writing a novel in serial form requires a great deal of skill, because Dickens had to ensure that his instalments were suitably gripping, often ending on 'cliff-hangers'. He would also adapt his characters in response to public opinion. At the same time, he had to make sure that the overall structure of the whole story still worked.

Literary Fame

Dickens swiftly became a highly-regarded author and celebrity in his own right. He was a prolific writer and would also give public readings of his work, which proved to be an excellent source of income for him. As well as visiting Europe, he toured America twice in his lifetime, giving talks and readings to great acclaim.

In the early 1840s, his popularity suffered a temporary wane – his novel 'Barnaby Rudge' was not popular and his 'American Notes for General Circulation', based on his first tour of the USA, were not well received. However, Charles staged a successful comeback with the publication in 1843 of 'A Christmas Carol'. The story of a miserly old man who encounters four ghosts on Christmas Eve, the novella was immensely popular and swiftly became his most enduring work.

Dickens is still regarded as one of the foremost authors in the English language, with works including 'Great Expectations', 'Bleak House', 'Our Mutual Friend' and the semi-autobiographical 'David Copperfield'. His ambitious plots and distinctive characters proved extremely popular with contemporary audiences and continue to be regarded as literary masterpieces today. He was astute at combining moments of great sadness and tragedy with well-observed, often humorous, character detail.

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Catherine Hogarth

Family Life

In 1836, Dickens married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of his then Editor. The couple had ten children and Catherine accompanied him on his first tour of America in 1842. While they were away, Catherine's sister Georgina moved into the family home to look after the children; she stayed with the family until Dickens died, running the household and helping to raise the children.

Dickens had been an avid theatre-goer all his life. In 1857, he produced a play, titled 'The Frozen Deep', with his friend, the writer Wilkie Collins. One of the actresses in the play was 18-year-old Ellen Ternan, and Dickens, then aged 45, fell passionately in love with her. Although she initially resisted his advances, he persisted and she eventually became his mistress.



Ellen Ternan

In 1858 Dickens separated from Catherine. This was extremely unusual and shocking to Victorian society – marriage was seen as an unbreakable institution. Catherine left the family home for good with just one of her children, leaving the others behind to be raised by Georgina. Ellen Ternan continued to be Dickens' mistress until his death in 1870.

Perhaps shaped by his experiences as a child, Dickens was extremely sensitive to poverty and social injustice, and this is evident in his writing

Charity Work

A keen philanthropist, Dickens raised money for Great Ormond Street Hospital and helped to set up Urania Cottage, a home for 'fallen women' (women who had slept with men out of wedlock, often resulting in the birth of a child). But his charity work was not limited to simply financial contributions. Perhaps shaped by his experiences as a child, Dickens was extremely sensitive to poverty and social injustice, and this is evident in his writing. Many of his novels depict the harsh realities of being poor in Victorian England (for example, the detailed descriptions of the workhouse in 'Oliver Twist', or the deprived conditions of the Cratchit family in 'A Christmas Carol'). For a contemporary audience, this was sometimes shocking – Victorian society was not used to having attention drawn to the severe deprivation suffered by some. Dickens forced his readers to examine their social conscience.

Religion and Spirituality

Dickens was a Christian and wrote a short book for his children about Jesus, titled 'The Life of Our Lord'. Although his exact denomination is not clear, he is known to have disapproved of showy displays of faith.

The author was also fascinated by the supernatural, and wrote several ghost stories. Despite this interest in the occult, he remained highly sceptical about spiritualism (the practice of contacting the dead through séances and other means). Spiritualism was popular in Victorian society and championed by several well-known figures at the time, including the Sherlock Holmes author Arthur Conan Doyle, but Dickens steadfastly rejected the claims of mediums. He did, however, believe in Mesmerism, a popular pseudo-medical practice invented by Franz

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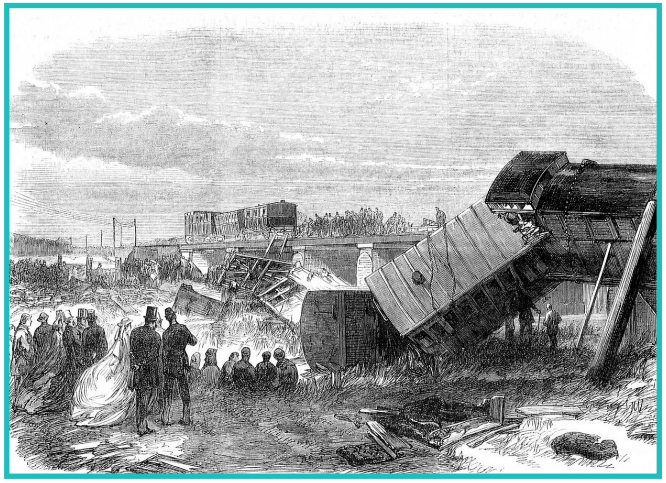
Mesmer. In Mesmerism, a patient would be put into a trance and then 'healed' by a Mesmerist who passed them invisible waves of their own 'animal magnetism'. Dickens believed he was an expert in this field and could use his own energy waves to heal people. This belief in his abilities lead to a disagreement with his wife Catherine, after Dickens spent several days of a holiday gazing into the eyes of a beautiful young woman in an attempt to cure her anxiety.

Train crash

In 1865, Charles was travelling by train with Ellen Ternan, his mistress, and her mother. As the train passed through Staplehurst in Kent, it went over a viaduct under repair and became derailed. Seven carriages plunged off the bridge into the river bed below.

The experience of the train crash had a profound effect on Dickens.

Luckily, Dickens' carriage, although suspended precariously, did not fall and he managed to climb out of the window, rescuing Ellen and her mother, before going to help the wounded and dying. Ten people were killed and forty



were injured. It was only when he was about to be evacuated from the scene by rescuers that Dickens realised he had left his unfinished manuscript of 'Our Mutual Friend' inside the train, and rushed to retrieve it.

The experience of the train crash had a profound effect on Dickens. His son claimed that the writer never fully recovered from the incident; he died five years to the day after it occurred. It's thought that the accident may have influenced Dickens to write the short ghost story 'The Signalman', which tells the tale of a railway signalman who is haunted by the premonition of a terrible train crash.

Death

In 1869, during a series of farewell readings, Dickens suffered a number of strokes. Although he partially recovered, he remained unwell. On 8th June, while working at home on his next novel, 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood', he had another stroke and died the next day.

There was national mourning when his death was announced. Dickens was buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey. His final novel was unfinished.



Dickens' Dream by Robert William Buss

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