

CHARLES DICKENS (1812-1870)

was the son of a clerk in the British Navy. At first the family was “middle-class” and could afford to send young Charles to school. Things changed when Dickens was 9 years old. His family became poor and they were put in prison because they could not pay their bills. The 12 year old Charles Dickens was left alone, living on his own, walking four miles to his job in a factory, sticking labels onto bottles of black paint. On Sundays he visited his family in the prison.



When his father was released from prison, Charles was able to go part-time to College and get a job working as a reporter for a newspaper. When he was 21 he started writing short sketches for the newspaper. He used the name “Boz”. These were popular with the readers. When he was 24 he started writing “**The Pickwick Papers**” as a weekly serial in a newspaper. The sales of the paper increased each week as more and more people bought the paper to follow the story.

His writing career was now under way. “**Oliver Twist**”, “**Nicholas Nickleby**” and “**The Old Curiosity Shop**” appeared as weekly episodes in the newspaper. “**The Old Curiosity Shop**” was hugely successful. This novel featured a girl called Little Nell. At the end of one week no one knew if she was alive or dead – and the following week there were enormous queues outside the newspaper office to buy the latest edition, just to find out what had happened.

Dickens then did a lot of travelling – twice to America, and almost every year to Europe. He wrote many more novels – but this time they were written in book form, not as weekly episodes in newspapers. His most famous novels were “**David Copperfield**”, “**A Tale of Two Cities**” “**Great Expectations**”, “**A Christmas Carol**” and “**Bleak House**”. As well as writing novels, he was the editor of two magazines. He also loved theatre and he spent a lot of time performing a one-man show, giving readings from his novels.

He was very popular, very successful and much loved by the public. He died suddenly at the age of 58 – and was given a very big funeral in London’s most important church – Westminster Abbey. He was buried in that part of the Abbey known as “Poets’ Corner” , the greatest honour that can be awarded to any writer.



Why Dickens is so important

He turned the novel into a hugely popular success. His stories about poor people, unfair treatment, bad living conditions and social injustice had an important effect on the people in power. People were moved to make things better, help the poor and make improvements because they learnt about them in Dickens’ novels.

In the following century Dickens was

recognised as a great novelist, a great social historian and a social reformer. He is probably the most important literary figure of the 19th Century.

The main novels of Charles Dickens:

Pickwick Papers (1837)

Originally published as 20 monthly instalments in a magazine. The story of Mr Pickwick and his various adventures. Mr Pickwick is the manager of the “Pickwick Club”. The novel consists of various adventures of members of the Club. This is an early, “picaresque” novel.



Oliver Twist (1838)

Published in monthly instalments in a magazine. Oliver Twist is an orphan brought up in an orphanage. In the orphanage all the boys are hungry, and he is chosen to be the one who asks for more. His famous line is:

Please, sir, can I have some more?

And this has become a famous phrase that everyone knows (just like the “To be or not to be” from “Hamlet”). He runs away and is made to join a gang of criminals. The younger boys are led by a 14 year old boy called the Artful Dodger and the whole gang is organised by an old Jewish criminal called Fagin. The older criminals include Bill Sykes (a real villain) who murders his girlfriend, Nancy. Oliver is rescued and there is a happy ending.

This novel opened people’s eyes to crime and poverty in London and showed how orphans and poor people were badly treated in the workhouses.

Nicholas Nickleby (1839)

This novel showed how much cruelty and bad treatment occurred at various private schools. Nicholas is employed to help at a school run by a wicked schoolteacher, Mr Wackford Squeers. Nicholas escapes with his friend, Smike. Among other adventures they join a travelling theatre group. (As well as showing the shocking state of schools at the time, this novel also gives some marvellous history of early theatre touring – and is now an important historical and social document of the touring theatre of those years)

The Old Curiosity Shop (1841)

Little Nell and her grandfather are hiding from the wicked Quilp – who is chasing them for money. The scene in which Little Nell dies was one of the most famous in Victorian literature. This book was so popular that the Death of Little Nell was talked about all over the country – and was a great “national” event.



Barnaby Rudge (1841)

This was Dickens first historical novel. (The only other was “A Tale of Two Cities”) The plot is based on the “Gordon Riots” of 1780. These were anti-Catholic riots led by Lord George Gordon. The story is seen through the eyes of Barnaby Rudge, a wild, half-witted lad who wanders around with his pet bird, a raven called Grip. The novel tells the story of life in a small village outside London, and how the arrival of Lord Gordon and his followers change things.

A Christmas Carol (1843)

Scrooge, a mean old miser, hates Christmas. Everytime anyone mentions Christmas, he says:

“Bah! Humbug!”

(The word “humbug” means “a lot of nonsense, worthless”. It has become an English catchphrase used whenever somebody refuses to join in any fun.) Scrooge goes to sleep on Christmas Eve and is visited by three ghosts – The Ghost of Christmas Past (when Scrooge was young and had a good time), the Ghost of Christmas Present (when Scrooge’s employee Bob Cratchitt and his crippled son Tiny Tim are having a poor Christmas because Scrooge will not pay proper wages) and the Ghost of Christmas Future, when Scrooge will die and no one will come to his funeral. In the morning Scrooge awakes and changes his ways.



He sends food to Bob Cratchitt and pays for a doctor for Tiny Tim, and gradually comes to love Christmas and to be loved by the people around him. (This novel “invented” lots of things that became traditional for an English Christmas! It is performed as a play or a film or a TV show every single Christmas – and is hugely popular. To call someone a “Scrooge” is the usual way of saying someone is mean and miserly.)

Martin Chuzzlewit (1844)

This extremely complicated novel is about selfishness. The old Martin Chuzzlewit is extremely rich and quite sure that the members of his family would like him dead so they can get their hands on his money. Because of these worries, he rejects his own grandson, also called Martin Chuzzlewit, he cause unhappiness to his adopted child, Mary, and allows himself to be cheated by one of Dickens’ most villainous characters, Mr Pecksniff. (This novel also contains the character of Mrs Sarah Gamp – a wonderful, grotesque creation who goes around with her black umbrella, and earns her living “laying-out” dead bodies to prepare them for their funerals.)

Dombey and Son (1848)

This is the story of Paul Dombey, a wealthy ship-owner and businessman. His dream is to have a son to continue his business. The book begins when his son is born, and Dombey's wife dies shortly after giving birth. The son, also named Paul, is weak and often ill, and does not make friends with other children. He is sent away first for his health, and then to a school near the sea, but he dies, aged only six years old. Dombey rejects his daughter, and treats her cruelly, forcing her into an arranged marriage. The pride and arrogance of Paul Dombey and his cruel treatment of his two children are major themes of the novel.



David Copperfield (1850)

This is almost an autobiography of Dickens’ own life. David Copperfield has a harsh childhood, many problems, but, eventually, there is a happy ending. *(See next pages)*

Bleak House (1853)

In the middle of a complicated story about the corrupt legal system, there is the story of Jo, the crossing sweeper – a young poor boy who “don’t know nuffink”. Jo dies of smallpox. Bad housing, poisoned water supplies, and bad hygiene caused thousands of London’s children to die.

(See next pages)

Hard Times (1854)

This novel looks at the way mid-century England was turning into “two nations”. The north of England was a land of cotton mills and dreadful poverty and labour conditions, while the parts of the south of England were wealthier and elegant. “Hard Times” is unusual in that it is not set in London. The action takes place in the fictitious Victorian industrial town of “Coketown” (a portrait of the real Manchester or Preston) ruled over by the wealthy industrialist, Mr Gradgrind. It highlights the social and economic pressures that some people were experiencing. It is one of Dickens’ most “political” rather than “social” novels.

Little Dorrit (1857)

This is satire on the state of British Government at the time. Much of Dickens’ anger is directed at the debtor’s prisons, in which people who owed money were kept in jail, unable to work, until they repaid their debts. The prison in this novel case is the Marshalsea, where Dickens’ own father had been imprisoned. He also attacks the British Treasury (calling it the “Circumlocution Office” – because everything just goes round and round forever, with no result), and the British class system. This is a novel all about greed, and how money changes the way people behave towards each other. William Dorrit is in jail because of his debts. His daughter Fanny, a dancer in the theatre, and his son, Tip, do not show much compassion for him. His other daughter, Amy (“Little Dorrit”) is the only one truly devoted to her father. Suddenly Old Dorrit becomes very rich, and they all become very arrogant and cruel – except Little Dorrit.

A Tale of Two Cities (1859)

The Two Cities are London and Paris. This is an historical novel set at the time of the French Revolution. It was different from the usual kind of Dickens’ novel – but was hugely successful. (It has been made into several Hollywood films). It has a very famous opening sentence:

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times”

which has become almost an English proverb.

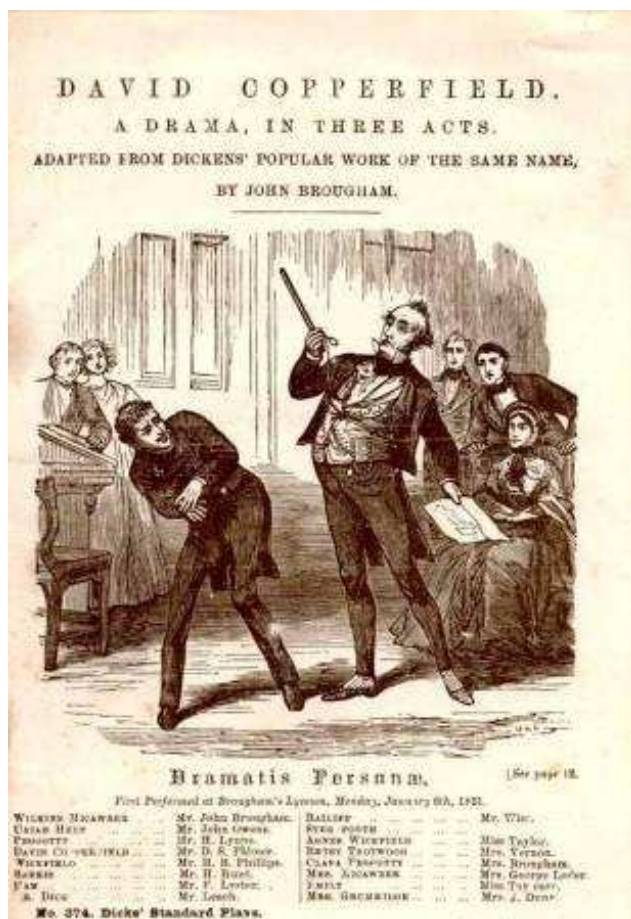
Great Expectations (1861)

The story of Pip and Miss Havisham, and “great expectations” which fade away. The novel opens with a highly dramatic scene in a graveyard when an escaped prisoner appears in front of the frightened 12 year old Pip. It also tells of a bitter old lady, Miss Havisham. On her wedding day many years earlier her husband-to-be did not appear. She had been jilted (*). After this heartbreak Miss Havisham shut herself in her darkened house where she sits in her bridal gown amongst the rotting wedding cake for several years. The image of the old lady and a wedding-cake covered with dust and cobwebs is a powerful one. Originally Dickens wrote a sad ending for this novel – but he was persuaded to change it for a happy ending to please the public.

(* “Jilted” has a very precise meaning: when a woman (or a man) is waiting in the church to get married, everything is prepared, and, at the very last minute, the bridegroom or the bride does not appear. The wedding has to be cancelled, and the humiliated bride or groom has been “jilted at the altar”



DAVID COPPERFIELD (1850)



Most of Dickens's novels were turned into plays as soon as they were published. Often they were "pirate" versions, and Dickens would not be paid.

Originally published in monthly episodes – it is almost an autobiography. Many parts of the story have echoes in Dickens' own life.

The story:

The story is told by the older David. David's father dies before he is born, and about seven years later, his mother marries Mr. Murdstone. David dislikes his step-father and his stepfather's sister, Jane. Murdstone beats David for falling behind with his studies, and David is sent away to a boarding school, Salem House, with a ruthless headmaster, Mr Creakle.

Here he becomes friends with James Steerforth and Tommy Traddles, who in true Dickens style leave and then reappear later on. David's mother gives birth to a baby boy (a half-brother for David) but she dies soon after. Murdstone sends David to work in a factory in London (just as Dickens himself did) but the factory landlord, Mr Micawber is sent to a debtor's prison after going bankrupt (just like Dickens' own father.) David escapes the factory.

He walks all the way from London to Dover, to find his only known relative - his eccentric Aunt Betsy Trotwood - who agrees to bring him up. David's aunt renames him Trotwood Copperfield, soon shortened to "Trot", and for the rest of the novel he is called by either name

The story follows David as he grows up. Many different characters feature in the novel:

- His faithful nurse, Peggotty, and the orphan Little Em'ly.
- His friend, Steerforth, who seduces Little Em'ly, causing the novel's greatest tragedy;
- His landlord's daughter, Agnes Wickfield, "the angel of the house" who becomes David's closest friend
- the constantly debt-ridden Mr. Wilkins Micawber.
- the wicked and crooked clerk, Uriah Heep, whose crimes are eventually discovered.

In typical Dickens style, the major characters end up happily or unhappily as they deserve. Mr. Peggotty safely takes Little Em'ly and the Micawbers to a new life in Australia, where they live happily. David first marries the beautiful but silly Dora Spenlow, but she dies soon after their marriage. David then marries and finds true happiness with Agnes, who had secretly always loved him. They have two sons and finally a daughter, who is named Betsy Trotwood Copperfield in honour of her godmother.

The style and themes:

The story is told by David Copperfield himself - the "first person narrator" – the first of Dickens' novels written in this way. It has one major theme throughout: the hero learns how to control his emotional and moral life. People must learn to disobey "the first mistaken impulse of the undisciplined heart", a theme repeated throughout the novel.

The characters in the novel belong to one of three categories:



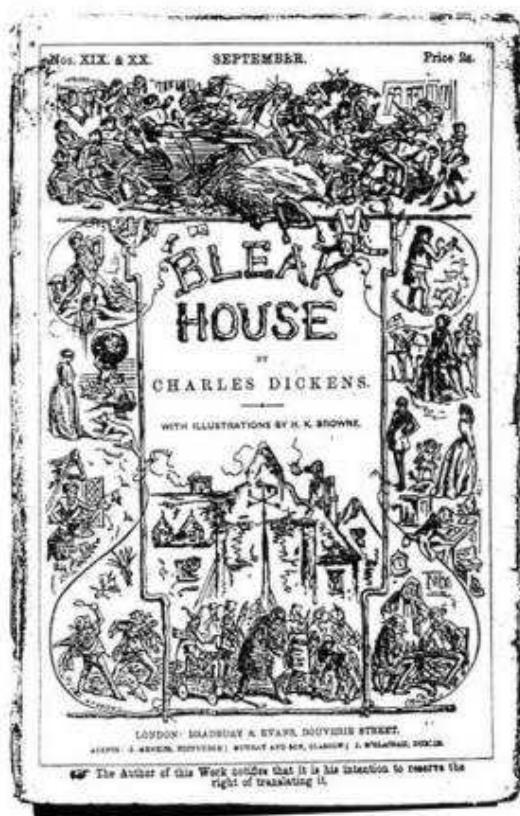
- Those who have disciplined hearts (Agnes, Mr Peggoty)
- those who do not have disciplined hearts (Uriah Heep and Steerforth)
- those who develop disciplined hearts over time (David himself, Betsy Trotwood)

A good comparison is between Agnes Wickfield and Dora Spenlow: Dora behaves like a child and cannot handle stress. She often breaks out in tears. Agnes remains calm and in control even when she has big problems. Only rarely does she give in to her emotions.

In spite of this pattern, the novel does not feel contrived – and is exciting, and a work of genius.



BLEAK HOUSE (1853)



The story:

“Bleak House” is a story of greed, murder, corruption and blackmail. It has a love story. It has a very sad story of a young boy dying. It has mystery. It is one of the earliest English novels to have a detective in it. It is a gripping tale.

The case of Jarndyce & Jarndyce, in the High Court of Chancery, has been going on for a long time. The current Jarndyce (John) is the owner of Bleak House. He is already caring for two young adults, Ada Clare and Richard Carstone, and now (when her aunt dies) he adopts a third young person – Esther Summerson. Richard Carstone hopes the legal case will end soon, and that he will get a lot of money as a result.

As the story unfolds we learn that Esther is the illegitimate daughter of Captain Hawdon and Lady Dedlock. The Dedlock's family lawyer, Tulkinghorn, discovers this and tries blackmail. He is murdered by Lady Dedlock's maid. Lady Dedlock later dies at the gates of the graveyard where Captain Hawdon is buried.

John Jarndyce has fallen in love with Esther and wants to marry her. She has said yes, but then she falls in love with Allan Woodcourt. When Jarndyce learns of her feelings for Allan he agrees to let her go and marry Allan. The chancery case eventually ends, but there is no money left for anyone. All the money has gone in lawyers' fees. Richard Carstone, who has married Ada, dies in despair.

Other characters in the story include

- Inspector Bucket – one of the earliest detectives to appear in Victorian literature
- Jo, the young boy who works as a road-sweeper and dies of smallpox
- Nemo, a mysterious man who dies early in the story. (He is later revealed to have been Captain Hawdon, the lover of Lady Dedlock, and the father of Esther)

The style and themes:

A “political” novel

The story is about a long-running legal dispute which has a great effect on the lives of all the people involved. It is a very heavy attack on the British legal system. As a result of this novel and its impact, the British legal system was changed in the 1870s. This is a good example of the power of the novel as a political force.

Two narrators and a mix of satire and comedy

In “Bleak House” Dickens uses TWO narrators: an unnamed “third-person narrator” and the orphan Esther take turns to tell the story. The range of this novel is enormous – from filthy slums to attacks on the aristocracy. It is a mix of satire and comedy.

Clever construction

Bleak House (the house not the novel) is not, in fact, bleak. The house is owned by one of Dickens' good characters, John Jarndyce and, in general, it represents a place of safety and help from the other places in the novel.

In a very clever move, Nemo is never actually "seen" alive in the novel. He is always described by others or is presumed to be on the other side of something. The best example of this is when Esther goes up a flight of stairs in Krook's house, passing the door of Nemo's room. We believe that Nemo is on the other side of it – but we are never actually told this.

But, it was very different from the previous Dickens' novels. It was more political, it had fewer funny characters. It was harsher. Many readers at the time felt it was not as good as his earlier work. However, since then, many critics consider it to be the best of Dickens' novels

Dickens and the British Legal System

The range of this novel is enormous – from filthy slums to attacks on the aristocracy. It is a mix of satire and comedy. However, its main purpose is an attack on the British legal system and specially the Court of Chancery. The Court of Chancery deals with disputes over legacies, wills and trusts. By the 1840s its slowness and corruption had become a national scandal.

In the Preface to the published novel, Dickens is very clear about his distrust of lawyers and his knowledge of their corrupt practices. He says:

*"I mention here that everything set forth in these pages concerning the Court of Chancery is substantially true, and within the truth."
(From the Preface to the 1853 edition)*

Dickens had personal experience of the Court 1844. A “fake” version of his “A Christmas Carol” was published, and he was advised to sue the illegal publisher. The legal proceedings involved as many as five separate Court appearances and took several years. Finally the fake publisher lost the case and was order to pay damages to Dickens. The publisher then said he had no money and was made bankrupt. Because of this, Dickens had to pay the entire costs of the case.



The lawyer's office—an illustration from Chapter 25

Dickens also had a lot of experience of the courts from his own childhood – when his father and the whole family was put in jail.

How Dickens portrays the corruption of the legal system

He uses the Chancery Court as a symbol for the whole of British law. He was attacking not just the Chancery Court but the whole of the British legal

system. He uses a number of symbols to illustrate this:

- There is a great “fog” over the whole system.
- The “dead hand” of the past is killing the present
- The law and the fog are killing the energy of the present

His story also gives examples of how

- The law is used to benefit the lawyers, not ordinary people
- The law protects old established society and not the modern world
- The law protects greed
- The law stops people from doing good, generous deeds
- The law obstructs instead of helps
- The law puts clouds of fog in the way of men’s visions

But Dickens is not a complete revolutionary

Although he is attacking the whole system, Dickens was in many ways old fashioned and traditional. He understood the need for legal rules, he supported the established religion. He delights in the good, old-fashioned British values.

But what he hates and rejects in “Bleak House” are the bad things from the past, the established selfishness and coldness that lives on in the bad old ways.



From a silent film version of Dickens's "Bleak House"

The theme of childhood in the novels of Dickens

There are autobiographical echoes of Dickens's childhood in many of his characters, including David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, and of course, Great Expectations's Pip. Like Dickens, all three of these characters came from poor beginnings and were able to rise above their poverty and achieve success. Many of the characters and themes of his novels are based on his own childhood experiences.

Dickens's own childhood

As a young boy Dickens was weak and unhealthy. While other boys were playing games, he was sitting and reading. His schooldays were spent in a harsh, cold, unfriendly schools with unpleasant teachers. He spent a lot of time walking on the Kent marshes, where he saw prisoners chained together on the ships at Chatham.



Pip and Magwitch in "Great Expectations"

The Dickens family moved to London when Dickens was ten years old, and soon his father was put in jail because he could not pay his debts. The family was forced to move into prison with him. When Dickens was twelve he left school and got a job putting labels on bottles of "blacking". He was badly treated and sometimes beaten. He was often hungry and cold, but he was surrounded by similar poor, abused, abandoned and hungry young children.

When his father was released from prison, things got better in the Dickens family and Dickens returned to school and got a job in a lawyer's office. He later became a reporter, and then an author and – eventually – one of the greatest novel writers of all times.

The effect of his early experiences in his writing

The novels of Charles Dickens are full of badly treated children: children who die of illness and starvation; children who are led into a life of crime in order to survive; children who are badly treated by adults; children who are abandoned.

His stories about poor people, unfair treatment, bad living conditions and social injustice had an important effect. People were moved to make things better, help the poor and make improvements because they learnt about them in Dickens' novels. Many of the Government's improvements in the conditions of schools, orphanages and working conditions for young people were because of the works of Dickens.

Dickens and his Portrayal of Children

Dickens is the first English novelist, indeed one of the first English writers of any kind, to place children at the very centre of his works. He often portrays children as pure innocent creatures of Nature who suffer from the cruelties of their surroundings. By contrasting the purity of Nature with the brutality of society he was able to portray children as victims of an uncaring society.

The Victorian Evangelist Church

The early Victorian Evangelist preachers believed children to be naturally wicked, and to be carrying the "original sin" of Adam and Eve. Only by submitting to the disciplines of the Evangelists'

religion could children be purified. (This was a complete contrast to the Romantic, Wordsworth view that children were born “trailing clouds of glory from God. . .” and their natural goodness was corrupted by society.)

Dickens hated the idea that children are naturally wicked. By creating characters like the Murdstones (“David Copperfield”) and Mr Podsnap (“Our Mutual Friend”) he was able to show the hypocrisy of these moralists, and reveal a hidden sadistic violence underneath their attitudes.



The Reverend Chadband (Bleak House)

Perhaps the best example of Dickens’s hatred for these “anti-children” preachers is his portrayal of the Reverend Chadband (“Bleak House”) – characterized as a magnificently evil and falsely pious humbug.

Prematurely aged children and Childish Adults

Dickens's novels often portray prematurely aged children – children who have been forced to grow old before their time. Examples of these are the

Artful Dodger
Smike
Little Nell,
Paul Dombey
Little Dorrit
Jenny Wren.

At the same time, there are a number of adult characters who remain childish in their behaviour and outlook - adults who have never grown up. Examples of these are

Mr Pickwick
The Cheeryble brothers
Mr Dick
Mr Micawber
Dora Copperfield
Harold Skimpole
Wemmick's Aged Parent
Jenny Wren's father
Maggy
Joe Gargery.

Often Dickens is writing about a world turned upside-down, where the natural order of things has been reversed, so that some children are forced by hardship and poverty to take control over adults who cannot properly run their own lives.

The Dickens’ family

The “typical” family in Dickens’s novels changes from the earlier to the later works. Early in his



The Cratchit Family round the dinner-table

career he writes of family life as a happy world. The home life of the Cratchits (“A Christmas Carol”) and the Wemmicks (“Great Expectations”) is a jolly place, an escape from a hard and heartless society. These families are disorganized, generous and usually in a party mood. They are often gathered around the dinner table, and even when the food is plain and simple, the dinner table is always a place of well-being and happiness.

In these early novels only occasionally does Dickens suggest that the world of the family can sometimes be uncomfortable,

with stresses, pressures and manipulation.

By the later novels the family dinner-table is often a smaller version of the unpleasant outside world. From the Murdstones (“David Copperfield”) to the Smallweeds (“Bleak House”) the family can be a source of cruel violence and emotional starvation.

By the time he is writing “Little Dorrit” the family is not just living in a metaphorical prison, but is living in a literal one (just as Dickens himself did for one time as a child.) And by the time he is writing “Great Expectations” the family he creates is a nightmare parody of a happy one: Pip’s sister is his mother, his brother-in-law Joe Gargery is both his father and his elder sibling, while the true creator of his adult self is a convict. Like many of today’s social workers, Dickens lays the blame for maladjusted and unhappy children on the failure of their parents to provide a decent family life.

A Growing Concern with children’s welfare

As the middle-classes developed there was a growing concern with children’s welfare. It was especially strong in Britain and the United States, and was reflected more and more in 19th Century literature. It is interesting to ask: did this interest in the welfare of children happen because of Dickens’s novels? Or did Dickens write about children because of this growing concern?

By creating such characters as Oliver Twist, Little Nell, Tiny Tim, Paul Dombey, and a host of others, Dickens made a very great difference to the way in Victorian Society thought about and cared for its children.

Sometimes these feelings became morbidly sentimental and perhaps a little overdone, with many of his child characters dying young. There is the classic comment by Oscar Wilde:

“One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without laughing”

Children corrupted by their circumstances

Although Dickens rejected the Evangelists’ preaching that children are inherently wicked, he did accept that some children can be corrupted by wicked temptations. As well as his innocent and pure children he was also able to create some wicked children - for example, the Artful Dodger and the boys in Fagin’s gang (“Oliver Twist”), or Tom Scott, the imp who is attached to Quilp (“The Old Curiosity Shop”).



Little Nell and Grandfather

Much later in his writing career he created Tom Gradgrind (“Hard Times”), a true “monster of selfishness” who grows into a young man given to “groveling sensualities”. (Chs.2 & 3). It is possible that some of these wicked boys were based on his fellow workers in the Blacking Factory?

Fathers, mothers and guardians

Although Dickens himself shares the Romantic view of innocent children, most of the adults in his stories do not. When he does create kind and caring adults, they are usually weak characters unable to do much good - characters like Master Humphrey and most notably Little Nell's grandfather.

Little Nell's grandfather obviously loves his granddaughter, but he frequently neglects her and leaves her home alone at night so that he can go off gambling. He is her kind protector, but there is a great contrast when he sneaks into her bedroom in order to steal the money she has sewn into her garments. (Ch. 30) At such times, what is the difference between the person who pretends to be devoted to her and her enemy, Quilp?

Normally we would expect the main protectors of children to be their mothers. But there is an obvious lack of good mothers in Dickens's world. (There is a whole separate topic on Dickens and his attitude to women!) When Dickens creates tender and loving mothers in his novels they tend to die young.

Children who have to take care of adults: “inverted parenthood

Jenny Wren, together with Little Nell and Amy Dorritt are all examples of the grown-up child, or “inverted parenthood”. Proper and “normal” parents are very rare in Dickens's novels, and the child very often has to take care of the adult. (This is a very literal interpretation of Wordsworth's “The Child is Father of the Man”) Many of Dickens's children have to be grown up before their time. Nell's grandfather knows this very well when he says to Master Humphrey:

“it is true that in many respects I am the child, and she the grown person” (Ch 1)

To which Master Humphrey says

“It always grieves me to contemplate the initiation of children into the ways of life, when they are scarcely more than infants” (Ch 1)

The changing image of the child in Dickens's later novels

Dickens takes a more or less gentle and sentimental approach to these prematurely grown-up children in his earlier novels. He is more an observer than an outright critic. However, as time goes by and his novels develop, these half-adult/half-child characters become less pleasant, less sympathetic, and more grotesque.



Jenny Wren and her alcoholic father in “Our Mutual Friend”

Jenny Wren

The end of this line is Jenny Wren, the crippled, hard-working dolls' dressmaker who has to support her drunken father. When Henry James reviewed the Dickens's novel he said: "Like all Mr. Dickens's pathetic characters, she is a little monster; she is deformed, unhealthy, unnatural; she belongs to the troop of hunchbacks, imbeciles, and precocious children who have carried on the sentimental business in all Mr. Dickens's novels; the little Nells, Smikes, & the Paul Dombey's."

Although it may be a little unfair to call Nell "a little monster," it is true that as Dickens grows older, the children in his novels become less childlike and less attractive. They become stranger and more peculiar. Little Nell has transformed into Jenny Wren, and in many ways Jenny Wren (the child) has become more like Master Humphrey or Nell's grandfather (the adults).



Dombey and Son

Paul Dombey

The character of Paul Dombey was created almost halfway through Dickens's writing career. Accordingly, he seems to contain an equal number of these contrasting characteristics – half of him is the innocent, abused child of the early writings and the other half is the “deformed, unhealthy, unnatural. . . precocious “ child that Henry James wrote about. Paul Dombey is frequently called “old-fashioned” , and grown old beyond his time.

The sense of “old-fashioned” is something that is gradually dying away - and this sense reflects the fact that young Paul Dombey is also gradually dying away. Dickens' heightens the pathos of Paul's death because, although we know that he is dying, Paul himself does not know. Young Paul does not know the whole truth. This limited knowledge is often used by Dickens to heighten the pathos, especially the pathos of children. (Another good example is Jo, the crossing-sweeper in

“Bleak House”). We are emotionally moved by those who do not know what we know. Compared to us, therefore, they are innocents. Even though Dickens's portrait of Young Paul is more complicated and less attractive than, say, Little Nell, at the end we are still emotionally moved by the pathos.

The abused child

Sexual abuse

Quilp (“The Old Curiosity Shop”) is a very strong example of how children who should be protected, are often not only neglected but also subject to cruelty and even sexual abuse. The sexual sub-text in Quilp's comments is unusually explicit for a Victorian novel. In Chapter 6 Quilp suggests to Little Nell that she might like to become his wife in a few years time, when he expects his current wife to have died. In other parts of the novel Quilp delights in kissing her, "smacking his lips," and exclaiming, "what a nice kiss that was - just upon the rosy part," and he extols her as

"such a chubby, rosy, cosy, little Nell. . . so small. . . so compact, so beautifully modelled, so fair, with such blue veins and such transparent skin, and such little feet, and such winning ways. . ." (Ch. 9).

Sexual abuse of children seems to have been a strong feature of the Victorian Underworld, and the very beauty, innocence, and vulnerability of Little Nell would make her all the more desirable for the paedophile.

Physical abuse

There are other sadists in Dickens's novels who delight in torturing children. Amongst them is Wackford Squeers (“Nicholas Nickleby”) :

"I never threshed a boy in a hackney-coach before. . . There's inconveniency in it, but the novelty gives it a sort of relish too!" (Ch. 38)

Or Mr. Creakle (“David Copperfield”) :

"he had a delight in cutting at the boys, which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite" (Ch. 7)

How abused children can sometimes feel affection for the abuser

Although characters like Smike and David Copperfield do not feel any kind of gratitude to Mr Squeers or Creakle, Dickens does create young boys and girls in the strange position where the abused and ill-treated child can feel some real attraction or affection for the abuser.

Examples of this include:

- **Oliver**, who is grateful to Fagin for giving him his first tasty meal. (The toasting fork grilling sausages in the flames may seem to us an image of the Devil, but for Oliver this is the image of a kind provider.) Indeed, Fagin seems genuinely fond of his “dears”, though looking at this from the 21st Century, some critics have suggested that Fagin might have a sexual interest in his “little dears”.
- **Little Nell**, despite all the unkind and uncaring acts of her grandfather, is terrified that she will be separated from him if people find out just how he behaves.
- **Little Dorrit’s** love for her father, in spite of his selfishness exploitation of her, is very strongly depicted.
- And **Jenny Wren**, the dolls’ dressmaker in his last completed novel, “Our Mutual Friend”, says throughout the novel that she is continually angry with her drunken father. His behaviour is so child-like that she frequently calls him “my child”. Yet, when he collapses and is about to die, she is heartbroken and cried out:

"My poor bad, bad boy! And he don't know me, he don't know me! O what shall I do. . . when my own child don't know me! (Ch 9)

Getting inside the mind of a child through the adult’s recollection

After 1847 (and therefore from the middle of his career) Dickens began to use the literary device of first-person narrators recalling their own childhoods. Using this first-person device, Dickens was now able to link together the way in which a child felt “then” and the way in which the adult views it “now”. His novels therefore became deeper, richer and more complex.

The opening of “Great Expectations” describes how Pip came to name himself:

"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (Ch 1)



And how he imagined what his dead parents were like by looking at their gravestones. By using this first-person technique and creating the double-layer of the adult looking back and recapturing the feelings and thoughts of the child, Dickens has made a significant advance in his literary style, in the depths of his novels, and in the complexity of his portrait of the child.

A scene from the classic film version of "Great Expectations" (1948)