

# CliffsNotes.com® About the Author for **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

## Charles Dickens

### Early Years

In spite of humble beginnings, little education, and the sometimes-critical literary reviewers, Charles Dickens was loved by his public, and amassed wealth, prestige, and a large legacy of published works. He was one of the few writers to enjoy both popular acceptance and financial success while still alive. The drive for this success had its roots in his childhood.

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born in Portsmouth, England on Friday, February 7, 1812. He was the second of eight children born to John and Elizabeth Dickens. His father, John, was the son of illiterate servants. John Dickens managed to escape a similar fate when the family his parents worked for got him a job in a navy pay office. John continued his upward climb by keeping his own lowly background a secret and courting Elizabeth Barrow, the daughter of a wealthy senior clerk who worked there. The marriage succeeded, but John's hopes for further advancement fizzled when his father-in-law was accused of embezzlement and fled the country. The loss of this financial opportunity did not slow the spending habits of John and Elizabeth, who liked the upper-class lifestyle. This problem would be their downfall as time went on.

During Charles Dickens' early years, his family moved a great deal due to his father's job and spending habits. He recalled later that the best time of his childhood was their five years in Chatham, where they moved when Dickens was five, and where life was stable and happy. Dickens loved the area, learned to read, and was sent to school.

However his father's financial problems required a move to smaller quarters in London when Dickens was ten. Their four-room home was cramped, creditors called frequently trying to collect payments, and Dickens' parents alternated between the stress of survival and the gaiety of continuing to party. Dickens wanted to return to school but was instead sent to work at the age of twelve to help support the family.

For twelve hours a day, six days a week, Charles Dickens pasted labels to bottles of shoe polish at the rat-infested, dilapidated Warren's Blacking factory. He was ridiculed and harassed by the older, bigger workers and shamed by the stigma of working in such filthy, low-class surroundings. Intellectually frustrated, resentful of his older sister (who was studying at the Royal Academy of Music), and hurt by his parents' lack of interest in his education, Dickens despaired.

When his father was arrested for nonpayment of a debt, Dickens' mother and younger siblings moved into prison with his father, leaving the twelve-year-old alone on the outside to continue working. His older sister remained at the music academy. Lonely, scared, and abandoned, Dickens lived in a run-down neighborhood close to the prison so that he could visit his family. It was

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a firsthand experience of poverty and prison life and a reinforcement of the considerable insecurity and emotional abandonment that marked his childhood.

A small inheritance a few months later allowed his family to leave prison. Dickens was finally allowed to attend school over his mother's objections — she did not want to lose his income. School was short-lived though: At fifteen, Dickens had to return to work. Dickens never got over the time he spent at Warren's and his fierce sense of betrayal and rage at his mother's callousness stayed with him for life. Recalling that time, he said: "I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back [to Warren's Blacking]."

## **Education**

In the strictest sense, Dickens' formal education was limited. His mother taught him to read when he was a young boy, and his early education was of a self-taught nature. By the age of ten, he had devoured novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, and Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. At nine, he experimented with writing a play for his family and called it *Misnar, the Sultan of India*.

In 1821, Dickens attended the Giles Academy in Chatham for about one year. Later, when he was twelve, he attended the Wellington House Academy in London. At fifteen, family problems required him to return to work, and so his last "schooling" was again, self-taught. He purchased a reading ticket to the British Museum at eighteen and immersed himself in its large library. He also taught himself shorthand.

## **Jobs**

For seven years after Dickens left Wellington House, he lived at home and worked at various jobs. He spent the first two years as a law clerk. After learning shorthand he spent four years as a legal reporter, then as a shorthand reporter in Parliament. In 1834 he joined the staff of the *Morning Chronicle* as a news reporter covering elections, Parliament, and other political events. Dickens also spent some of his time involved in the theater, and he also began to write for publication. His adulthood was marked by a feverish work pace and a desire to achieve.

## **Love and Family**

At eighteen Dickens met Maria Beadnell, the daughter of a rich banker. She was two years older, beautiful — he fell totally in love. He wrote to her: "I never have loved and I never can love any human creature breathing but yourself." Though the relationship went well for a while, she lost interest in him after returning from finishing school in Paris. Dickens' friend and biographer, John Forster, was at first surprised that Dickens was so affected by this relationship, a pain that continued even years later. But Forster realized that this was fueled by a deep sense of social

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inferiority. Dickens was determined to succeed beyond everyone's wildest dreams and show them how wrong they were about him. Interestingly enough, he met Maria again years later. Eagerly looking forward to his meeting with her, and expecting the desirable vision of his youth, he was crushed when a middle-aged woman resembling his wife showed up. As his sister-in-law happily put it, Maria "had become very fat!"

In 1834, Dickens met Catherine Hogarth, the oldest daughter of the *Morning Chronicle's* editor, George Hogarth. Hogarth had favorably reviewed Dickens' work, *Sketches by Boz*, and the two men had become friends. Charles and Catherine were engaged in 1835 and married in 1836. It was a strange courtship. While the two held each other in affection and Catherine shared his interest in a family, the courtship lacked the passion of his relationship with Beadnell. Dickens often broke dates with Catherine to meet work deadlines and sent her reprimanding letters if she protested.

As time went on their differences grew more apparent. Catherine was not outgoing or socially poised, and she avoided the public and social events her husband attended. In addition, Catherine's younger sister, Mary, had come to live with them shortly after their marriage. Dickens was very attached to Mary and when she died suddenly in 1838 at the age of seventeen, he was devastated. His enduring grief over her death incurred his wife's jealousy. Mary, adored by Charles Dickens, would show up again and again as a character in his works.

In time, another seventeen-year-old would steal his heart. Middle-aged, hard working, and disillusioned with his marriage, Dickens met Ellen Ternan, an actress in one of his plays. She was everything his wife was not: lovely, young, and slim. Catherine, with ten pregnancies, had grown stout, and at forty-three could not compete with the younger woman. It did not take long for the marriage to dissolve, resulting in something of a scandal at the time. Catherine, rejected by her husband, left the family home. The children rarely saw her because they stayed with Dickens, and she died in 1879, nine years after he. Dickens spent the rest of his life maintaining a secret relationship with Ternan.

## **Literary Writing and the Rest of Life**

During his early working years, Dickens had started writing short pieces or "sketches." Some were stories; others, descriptions of places in London, such as Newgate Prison or the shopping districts. One of these, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk," was published in 1833 in the *Monthly Magazine*. It was an emotional and exciting moment for the young writer even though he received no payment or credit for that first article. The magazine requested more and he started using the pen name, Boz. In 1836, he published a collection of sixty of these pieces in a book called *Sketches by Boz*. It received critical praise and sales were good. *Monthly Magazine* then asked

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Dickens to write a humorous novel that they would publish in twenty installments. Thus, Dickens' novel *Pickwick Papers* was born.

By the fourth installment of *Pickwick Papers*, Charles Dickens was a dramatic success. People at all levels of society loved him. The acclaim only fueled his intensity. While still working on *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens started a much darker novel, *Oliver Twist*. It was a social criticism of the exploitation of orphans both in institutions and on the streets. Not to be slowed, he began *Nicholas Nickleby* when *Oliver Twist* was only half-finished. *Nickleby* combined both the humor of his first novel with the criticism of his second, focusing on the corruption of private boarding schools.

His grief over the death of his sister-in-law, Mary, probably served as the basis for the character, Little Nell, in his next novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*. His readers followed the story closely especially when Nell became sick — many, desperately hoping she would not die, begged the publisher to spare her. *Barnaby Rudge* was Dickens' next novel, a historical novel set in England during the French Revolution.

In 1842, Dickens and his wife traveled through America. He found himself crushed with admirers to the point of feeling oppressed by his fame. In addition, the attitudes and vanity of some of the Americans disturbed him, especially with regard to slavery, and he was frustrated by the lack of copyright protection in the States — many of his works were being published there without any payment to him. When he returned home, Dickens wrote *American Notes*. While polite, Dickens' feelings about America were nevertheless obvious. American critics were, as you may expect, hostile.

His next works were a series of five Christmas stories, of which "A Christmas Carol" was the most successful. *Martin Chuzzlewit*, a more direct attack on America and its attitudes, followed. Dickens also spent time creating and editing a newspaper, the *Daily News*, and acting in a number of amateur theater productions. At this same time, he had a number of flirtations with other women and his marriage was crumbling. Concentration and sleep suffered, so much so that his seventh novel, *Dombey and Son*, took a great deal of time and struggle to finish. However, the slower pace didn't diminish the quality of Dickens work: Philip Collins called *Dombey and Son* Dickens' "first mature masterpiece."

This period was marked by a number of painful personal experiences: the death of his older sister, Fanny, in 1848; Catherine's nervous breakdown in 1850 after the birth of their daughter Dora Annie; the 1851 death of Dora; and the death of Dickens' father, John, in 1851. Yet during this period, Dickens achieved a major turning point in his writing: *David Copperfield*. Lawrence Kappel, a modern reviewer, crystallizes the achievement:

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“For the first time, he conceived a hero who could survive in the midst of the problem-filled world of experience by using his artistic imagination, like Dickens himself. This autobiographical novel was a celebration of the artist’s ability to cope with the world right in the center of it, as opposed to just surviving the world by retreating to some safe place at the edge of it, as Dickens’ earlier heroes had done.”

The next several years would bring the publication of Dickens’ next three novels — *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, and *Little Dorrit* — as well as the anguish and personal scandal of his involvement with Ellen Ternan and his divorce from Catherine. The novels were darker than anything he had previously written and their focus was mostly social criticism: *Bleak House*’s criticism targeted the legal system (it may have been the first detective novel published in English), *Hard Times* hit the government, and *Little Dorrit* aimed at the problems of society’s class structure. This period also saw Dickens become involved in more theatrical productions, start a weekly magazine, *Household Words*, and give public readings of his works.

In 1859, after a dispute with the publishers of *Household Words*, Dickens left and started another magazine, *All the Year Round*. The first issue carried the first installment of his next novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Like *Barnaby Rudge* it was a historical novel, set in France during the riotous 1770s and 1780s. The novel was popular with his readers, but did not receive much critical acclaim. Struggling to improve the magazine’s circulation and revenue, Dickens hit gold and a financial rescue with his next novel: *Great Expectations*. In spite of a mixed reception by reviewers, the reading public loved it — many proclaimed it to be his best work.

Also during this time, Dickens burned most of his letters and papers: In his success, he did not want anyone to make his life more interesting than his novels. By destroying his notes, he effectively took his insights regarding his works to the grave, leaving the interpretations of his stories up to his literary critics and readers.

After *Great Expectations*, Dickens began work on his last complete novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. It was a return to Dickens’ darker style: social criticism was of a corrupt society, with London’s dumps and polluted river symbolizing a modern industrial wasteland. Dickens continued to chain-smoke and overwork, maintaining a heavy public-reading schedule as well as national and international tours. From 1865 until his death, Dickens experienced a number of health problems, including a possible heart attack and a series of small strokes. The work he began in 1869, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was never finished — on June 8, 1870 he suffered an apparent cerebral hemorrhage, collapsing on the floor after dinner. He died the next day.