

**MINISTRY OF HIGHER AND  
SECONDARY SPECIAL EDUCATION OF  
THE REPUBLIC OF UZBEKISTAN  
UZBEK STATE WORLD LANGUAGES  
UNIVERSITY**

# **SELF-STUDY**

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# Toshkent-2014

## Charles John Huffam Dickens

**Charles John Huffam Dickens** (7 February 1812 – 9 June 1870) was an English writer and social critic. He created some of the world's most memorable fictional characters and is generally regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian period.<sup>[1]</sup> During his life, his works enjoyed unprecedented fame, and by the twentieth century his literary genius was broadly acknowledged by critics and scholars. His novels and short stories continue to be widely popular.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

Born in Portsmouth, England, Dickens was forced to leave school to work in a factory when his father was thrown into debtors' prison. Although he had little formal education, his early impoverishment drove him to succeed. Over his career he edited a weekly journal for 20 years, wrote 15 novels, five novellas and hundreds of short stories and non-fiction articles, lectured and performed extensively, was an indefatigable letter writer, and campaigned vigorously for children's rights, education, and other social reforms.

Dickens sprang to fame with the 1836 serial publication of *The Pickwick Papers*. Within a few years he had become an international literary celebrity, famous for his humour, satire, and keen observation of character and society. His novels, most published in monthly or weekly instalments, pioneered the serial publication of narrative fiction, which became the dominant Victorian mode for novel publication.<sup>[4][5]</sup> The instalment format allowed Dickens to evaluate his audience's reaction, and he often modified his plot and character development based on such feedback.<sup>[5]</sup> For example, when his wife's chiropodist expressed distress at the way Miss Mowcher in *David Copperfield* seemed to reflect her disabilities, Dickens went on to improve the character with positive features.<sup>[6]</sup> His plots were carefully constructed, and Dickens often wove in elements from topical events into his narratives.<sup>[7]</sup> Masses of the illiterate poor chipped in ha'pennies to have each new monthly episode read to them, opening up and inspiring a new class of readers.<sup>[8]</sup>

Dickens was regarded as the literary colossus of his age.<sup>[9]</sup> His 1843 novella, *A Christmas Carol*, is one of the most influential works ever written, and it remains popular and continues to inspire adaptations in every artistic genre. Set in London and Paris, his 1859 novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, is the best selling novel of all time.<sup>[10]</sup> His creative genius has been praised by fellow writers—from Leo Tolstoy to George Orwell and G. K. Chesterton—for its realism, comedy, prose style, unique characterisations, and social criticism. On the other hand Oscar Wilde, Henry James and Virginia Woolf complained of a lack of psychological depth, loose writing, and a vein of saccharine sentimentalism. The term *Dickensian* is used to describe something that is reminiscent of Dickens and his writings, such as poor social conditions or comically repulsive characters. Charles Dickens' birthplace

2 Ordnance Terrace, Chatham, Dickens' home 1817–1822

Charles John Huffam Dickens was born on 7 February 1812, at Landport in Portsea Island, the second of eight children to John Dickens (1785–1851) and Elizabeth Dickens (née Barrow; 1789–1863). His father was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office and was temporarily on duty in the district. Very soon after his birth the family moved to Norfolk Street, Bloomsbury, and then, when he was four, to Chatham, Kent, where he spent his formative years until the age of 11. His early years seem to have been idyllic, though he thought himself a "very small and not-over-particularly-taken-care-of boy".

Charles spent time outdoors, but also read voraciously, especially the picaresque novels of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding. He retained poignant memories of childhood, helped by a near-photographic

memory of people and events, which he used in his writing.<sup>[13]</sup> His father's brief period as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office gave him a few years of private education, first at a dame-school, and then at a school run by William Giles, a dissenter, in Chatham.



Illustration by Fred Bernard of Dickens at work in a shoe-blacking factory after his father had been sent to the Marshalsea, published in the 1892 edition of Forster's *Life of Dickens*<sup>[15]</sup>

This period came to an abrupt end when financial difficulties forced the family to move to Camden Town in London in 1822. Living beyond his means,<sup>[16]</sup> John Dickens was forced by his creditors into the Marshalsea debtors' prison in Southwark London in 1824. His wife and youngest children joined him there, as was the practice at the time. Charles, then 12 years old, boarded with Elizabeth Roylance, a family friend, at 112 College Place, Camden Town.<sup>[17]</sup> Roylance was "a reduced [impoverished] old lady, long known to our family", whom Dickens later immortalised, "with a few alterations and embellishments", as "Mrs. Pipchin", in *Dombey and Son*. Later, he lived in a back-attic in the house of an agent for the Insolvent Court, Archibald Russell, "a fat, good-natured, kind old gentleman ... with a quiet old wife" and lame son, in Lant Street in The Borough.<sup>[18]</sup> They provided the inspiration for the Garlands in *The Old Curiosity Shop*.<sup>[19]</sup>

On Sundays—with his sister Frances, free from her studies at the Royal Academy of Music—he spent the day at the Marshalsea.<sup>[20]</sup> Dickens would later use the prison as a setting in *Little Dorrit*. To pay for his board and to help his family, Dickens was forced to leave school and work ten-hour days at Warren's Blacking Warehouse, on Hungerford Stairs, near the present Charing Cross railway station, where he earned six shillings a week pasting labels on pots of boot blacking. The strenuous and often harsh working conditions made a lasting impression on Dickens and later influenced his fiction and essays, becoming the foundation of his interest in the reform of socio-economic and labour conditions, the rigours of which he believed were unfairly borne by the poor. He later wrote that he wondered "how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age".<sup>[21]</sup> As he recalled to John Forster (from *The Life of Charles Dickens*):

The blacking-warehouse was the last house on the left-hand side of the way, at old Hungerford Stairs. It was a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms, and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again. The counting-house was on the first floor, looking over the coal-barges and the river. There was a recess in it, in which I was to sit and work. My work was to cover the pots of paste-blackening; first with a piece of oil-paper, and then with a piece of blue

paper; to tie them round with a string; and then to clip the paper close and neat, all round, until it looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary's shop. When a certain number of grosses of pots had attained this pitch of perfection, I was to paste on each a printed label, and then go on again with more pots. Two or three other boys were kept at similar duty down-stairs on similar wages. One of them came up, in a ragged apron and a paper cap, on the first Monday morning, to show me the trick of using the string and tying the knot. His name was Bob Fagin; and I took the liberty of using his name, long afterwards, in *Oliver Twist*.<sup>[21]</sup>



The Marshalsea around 1897, after it had closed

A few months after his imprisonment, John Dickens's paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Dickens, died and bequeathed him the sum of £450. On the expectation of this legacy, Dickens was granted release from prison. Under the Insolvent Debtors Act, Dickens arranged for payment of his creditors, and he and his family left Marshalsea,<sup>[22]</sup> for the home of Mrs. Roylance.

Charles' mother Elizabeth Dickens did not immediately remove him from the boot-blackening factory. This incident may have done much to confirm Dickens's view that a father should rule the family, a mother find her proper sphere inside the home. "I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget, that my mother was warm for my being sent back". His mother's failure to request his return was a factor in his dissatisfied attitude towards women.<sup>[23]</sup>

Righteous anger stemming from his own situation and the conditions under which working-class people lived became major themes of his works, and it was this unhappy period in his youth to which he alluded in his favourite, and most autobiographical, novel, *David Copperfield*.<sup>[24]</sup> "I had no advice, no counsel, no encouragement, no consolation, no assistance, no support, of any kind, from anyone, that I can call to mind, as I hope to go to heaven!"<sup>[25]</sup>

Charles was eventually sent to the Wellington House Academy in Camden Town, but did not consider it to be a good school. "Much of the haphazard, desultory teaching, poor discipline punctuated by the headmaster's sadistic brutality, the seedy ushers and general run-down atmosphere, are embodied in Mr. Creakle's Establishment in *David Copperfield*."<sup>[25]</sup>

Dickens worked at the law office of Ellis and Blackmore, attorneys, of Holborn Court, Gray's Inn, as a junior clerk from May 1827 to November 1828. Then, having learned Gurney's system of shorthand in his spare time, he left to become a freelance reporter. A distant relative, Thomas Charlton, was a freelance reporter at Doctors' Commons, and Dickens was able to share his box there to report the legal proceedings for nearly four years.<sup>[26][27]</sup> This education was to inform works such as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Dombey and*

*Son*, and especially *Bleak House*—whose vivid portrayal of the machinations and bureaucracy of the legal system did much to enlighten the general public and served as a vehicle for dissemination of Dickens's own views regarding, particularly, the heavy burden on the poor who were forced by circumstances to "go to law".

In 1830, Dickens met his first love, Maria Beadnell, thought to have been the model for the character Dora in *David Copperfield*. Maria's parents disapproved of the courtship and ended the relationship by sending her to school in Paris.<sup>[28]</sup>

## Journalism and early novels

In 1832, at age 20, Dickens was energetic, full of good humour, enjoyed mimicry and popular entertainment, lacked a clear sense of what he wanted to become, yet knew he wanted to be famous. He was drawn to the theatre and landed an acting audition at Covent Garden, for which he prepared meticulously but which he missed because of a cold, ending his aspirations for a career on the stage. A year later he submitted his first story, "A Dinner at Poplar Walk" to the London periodical, *Monthly Magazine*.<sup>[29]</sup> He rented rooms at Furnival's Inn and worked as a political journalist, reporting on Parliamentary debate and travelling across Britain to cover election campaigns for the *Morning Chronicle*. His journalism, in the form of sketches in periodicals, formed his first collection of pieces *Sketches by Boz*—Boz being a family nickname he employed as a pseudonym for some years—published in 1836.<sup>[30][31]</sup> Dickens apparently adopted it from the nickname Moses, which he had given to his youngest brother Augustus Dickens, after a character in Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*. When pronounced by anyone with a head cold, 'Moses' became 'Boses', and was later shortened to *Boz*.<sup>[31][32]</sup> Dickens's own name was considered "queer" by a contemporary critic, who wrote in 1849: "Mr Dickens, as if in revenge for his own queer name, does bestow still queerer ones upon his fictitious creations." He continued to contribute to and edit journals throughout his literary career.<sup>[29]</sup>



Catherine Hogarth Dickens by Samuel Lawrence (1838)

The success of these sketches led to a proposal from publishers Chapman and Hall for Dickens to supply text to match Robert Seymour's engraved illustrations in a monthly letterpress. Seymour committed suicide after the second instalment and Dickens, who wanted to write a connected series of sketches, hired "Phiz" to provide the engravings (which were reduced from four to two per instalment) for the story. The resulting story was *The Pickwick Papers* with the final instalment selling 40,000 copies.

In November 1836 Dickens accepted the job of editor of *Bentley's Miscellany*, a position he held for three years, until he fell out with the owner.<sup>1</sup>In 1836 as he finished the last instalments of *The Pickwick Papers* he began writing the beginning instalments of *Oliver Twist*—writing as many as 90 pages a month—while continuing work on *Bentley's*, and also writing four plays, the production of which he oversaw. *Oliver Twist*, published in 1838, became one of Dickens's better known stories, with dialogue

that transferred well to the stage (most likely because he was writing stage plays at the same time) and, more importantly, it was the first Victorian novel with a child protagonist.<sup>[34]</sup>



Young Charles Dickens by Daniel Maclise (1839)

On 2 April 1836, after a one year engagement during which he wrote *The Pickwick Papers*, he married Catherine Thomson Hogarth (1816–1879), the daughter of George Hogarth, editor of the *Evening Chronicle*.<sup>[35]</sup> After a brief honeymoon in Chalk, Kent, they returned to lodgings at Furnival's Inn.<sup>[36]</sup> The first of ten children, Charley, was born in January 1837, and a few months later the family set up home in Bloomsbury at 48 Doughty Street, London, (on which Charles had a three-year lease at £80 a year) from 25 March 1837 until December 1839.<sup>[35][37]</sup> 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. Dickens idealised her and is thought to have drawn on memories of her for his later descriptions of Rose Maylie, Little Nell and Florence Dombey.<sup>[38]</sup> His grief was so great that he was unable to make the deadline for the June instalment of *Pickwick Papers* and had to cancel the *Oliver Twist* instalment that month as well.<sup>[34]</sup>

At the same time, his success as a novelist continued. The young Queen Victoria read both *Oliver Twist* and *Pickwick*, staying up until midnight to discuss them.<sup>[39]</sup> *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), *The Old Curiosity Shop* and, finally, *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* as part of the *Master Humphrey's Clock* series (1840–41), were all published in monthly instalments before being made into books.<sup>[40]</sup>

### **First visit to the United States** [edit]

In 1842, Dickens and his wife made their first trip to the United States and Canada. At this time Georgina Hogarth, another sister of Catherine, joined the Dickens household, now living at Devonshire Terrace, Marylebone, to care for the young family they had left behind.<sup>[41]</sup> She remained with them as housekeeper, organiser, adviser and friend until Dickens's death in 1870.<sup>[42]</sup>



Sketch of Dickens in 1842 during American Tour. Sketch of Dickens's sister Fanny, bottom left

He described his impressions in a travelogue, *American Notes for General Circulation*. Some of the episodes in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–44) also drew on these first-hand experiences. Dickens includes in *Notes* a powerful condemnation of slavery, which he had attacked as early as *The Pickwick Papers*, correlating the emancipation of the poor in England with the abolition of slavery abroad.<sup>[43]</sup> During his visit, Dickens spent a month in New York City, giving lectures and raising the question of international copyright laws and the pirating of his work in America.<sup>[44][45]</sup> He persuaded twenty five writers, headed by Washington Irving, to sign a petition for him to take to Congress, but the press were generally hostile to this, saying that he should be grateful for his popularity and that it was mercenary to complain about his work being pirated.<sup>[46]</sup>

Soon after his return to England, Dickens began work on the first of his Christmas stories, *A Christmas Carol*, written in 1843, which was followed by *The Chimes* in 1844 and *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1845. Of these *A Christmas Carol* was most popular and, tapping into an old tradition, did much to promote a renewed enthusiasm for the joys of Christmas in Britain and America.<sup>[47]</sup> The seeds for the story were planted in Dickens's mind during a trip to Manchester to witness the conditions of the manufacturing workers there. This, along with scenes he had recently witnessed at the Field Lane Ragged School, caused Dickens to resolve to "strike a sledge hammer blow" for the poor. As the idea for the story took shape and the writing began in earnest, Dickens became engrossed in the book. He wrote that as the tale unfolded he "wept and laughed, and wept again" as he "walked about the black streets of London fifteen or twenty miles many a night when all sober folks had gone to bed."<sup>[48]</sup>

After living briefly in Italy (1844), Dickens travelled to Switzerland (1846); it was here he began work on *Dombey and Son* (1846–48). This and *David Copperfield* (1849–50) mark a significant artistic break in Dickens's career as his novels became more serious in theme and more carefully planned than his early works.

## **Philanthropy**[edit]

In May 1846 Angela Burdett Coutts, heir to the Coutts banking fortune, approached Dickens about setting up a home for the redemption of fallen women of the working class. Coutts envisioned a home that would replace the punitive regimes of existing institutions with a reformatory environment conducive to education and proficiency in domestic household chores. After initially resisting, Dickens eventually founded the home, named "Urania Cottage", in the Lime Grove section of Shepherds Bush, which he was to manage for ten years,<sup>[49]</sup> setting the house rules and reviewing the accounts and interviewing prospective residents.<sup>[50]</sup> Emigration and marriage were central to Dickens's agenda for the women on leaving Urania Cottage, from which it is estimated that about 100 women graduated between 1847 and 1859.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Religious views[edit]

Dickens was a professing Christian,<sup>[52]</sup> who would be described by his son Henry Fielding Dickens as someone who "*possessed deep religious convictions*". Though in the early 1840s Dickens had showed an interest in Unitarian Christianity, he never strayed from his attachment to popular lay Anglicanism.<sup>[53]</sup> He would also write a religious work called *The Life of Our Lord* (1849), which was a short book about the life of Jesus Christ, and was written with the purpose of inculcating his faith to his children and family.<sup>[54][55]</sup>

On the other hand, he dissaproved denominations such as Roman Catholicism and the 19th century evangelicalism and addressed critically what he saw as the hypocrisy of religious institutions and philosophies like spiritualism, all of which he considered deviations from the true spirit of Christianity.<sup>[56]</sup>

Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky would refer to Dickens as "*that great Christian writer*".<sup>[57][58]</sup>

## Middle years[edit]



"Little Dorrit" 1856

In late November 1851, Dickens moved into Tavistock House where he wrote *Bleak House* (1852–53), *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1856).<sup>[59]</sup> It was here that he indulged in the amateur theatricals which are described in Forster's "Life".<sup>[60]</sup> During this period he worked closely with the novelist and playwright Wilkie Collins. In 1856, his income from writing allowed him to buy Gad's Hill Place in Higham, Kent. As a child, Dickens had walked past the house and dreamed of living in it. The area was also the scene of some of the events of Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part 1*, and this literary connection pleased him.<sup>[61]</sup>





Ellen Ternan, 1858.

In 1857, Dickens hired professional actresses for the play *The Frozen Deep*, which he and his protégé Wilkie Collins had written. Dickens fell deeply in love with one of the actresses, Ellen Ternan, and this passion was to last the rest of his life.<sup>[62]</sup> Dickens was 45 and Ternan 18 when he made the decision, which went strongly against Victorian convention, to separate from his wife, Catherine, in 1858—divorce was still unthinkable for someone as famous as he was. When Catherine left, never to see her husband again, she took with her one child, leaving the other children to be raised by her sister Georgina who chose to stay at Gad's Hill.<sup>[42]</sup>

During this period, whilst pondering a project to give public readings for his own profit, Dickens was approached by Great Ormond Street Hospital to help it survive its first major financial crisis through a charitable appeal. His 'Drooping Buds' essay in *Household Words* earlier in 3 April 1852 was considered by the hospital's founders to have been the catalyst for the hospital's success.<sup>[63]</sup> Dickens, whose philanthropy was well-known, was asked by his friend, the hospital's founder Charles West, to preside over the appeal, and he threw himself into the task, heart and soul.<sup>[64]</sup> Dickens's public readings secured sufficient funds for an endowment to put the hospital on a sound financial footing—one reading on 9 February 1858 alone raised £3,000.<sup>[65][66][67]</sup>

After separating from Catherine,<sup>[68]</sup> Dickens undertook a series of hugely popular and remunerative reading tours which, together with his journalism, were to absorb most of his creative energies for the next decade, in which he was to write only two more novels.<sup>[69]</sup> His first reading tour, lasting from April 1858 to February 1859, consisted of 129 appearances in 49 different towns throughout England, Scotland and Ireland.<sup>[70]</sup> Dickens's continued fascination with the theatrical world was written into the theatre scenes in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but more importantly he found an outlet in public readings. In 1866, he undertook a series of public readings in England and Scotland, with more the following year in England and Ireland.



At his desk in 1858

Major works, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Great Expectations* (1861), soon followed, and were resounding successes. During this time he was also the publisher and editor of, and a major contributor to, the journals *Household Words* (1850–1859) and *All the Year Round* (1858–1870).<sup>[71]</sup>

In early September 1860, in a field behind Gad's Hill, Dickens made a great bonfire of almost his entire correspondence—only those letters on business matters were spared. Since Ellen Ternan also destroyed all of his letters to her,<sup>[72]</sup> the extent of the affair between the two remains speculative.<sup>[73]</sup> In the 1930s, Thomas Wright recounted that Ternan had unburdened herself with a Canon Benham, and gave currency to rumours they had been lovers.<sup>[74]</sup> That the two had a son who died in infancy was alleged by Dickens's daughter, Kate Perugini, whom Gladys Storey had interviewed before her death in 1929. Storey published

her account in *Dickens and Daughter*,<sup>[75][76]</sup> but no contemporary evidence exists. On his death, Dickens settled an annuity on Ternan which made her a financially independent woman. Claire Tomalin's book, *The Invisible Woman*, argues that Ternan lived with Dickens secretly for the last 13 years of his life. The book was subsequently turned into a play, *Little Nell*, by Simon Gray, and a 2013 film.

In the same period, Dickens furthered his interest in the paranormal, becoming one of the early members of The Ghost Club.<sup>[77]</sup>

In June 1862 he was offered £10,000 for a reading tour of Australia.<sup>[78]</sup> He was enthusiastic, and even planned a travel book, *The Uncommercial Traveller Upside Down*, but ultimately decided against the tour.<sup>[79]</sup> However, two of his sons—Alfred D'Orsay Tennyson Dickens and Edward Bulwer Lytton Dickens—migrated to Australia, Edward becoming a member of the Parliament of New South Wales as Member for Wilcannia 1889–94.<sup>[80][81]</sup>



### A Child's Hymn

Hear my prayer, O heavenly Father,  
Ere I lay me down to sleep;  
Bid Thy angels, pure and holy,  
Round my bed their vigil keep.

My sins are heavy, but Thy mercy  
Far outweighs them, every one;  
Down before Thy cross I cast them,  
Trusting in Thy help alone.

Keep me through this night of peril  
Underneath its boundless shade;  
Take me to Thy rest, I pray Thee,

When my pilgrimage is made.

None shall measure out Thy patience  
By the span of human thought;  
None shall bound the tender mercies  
Which Thy Holy Son has bought.

Pardon all my past transgressions,  
Give me strength for days to come;  
Guide and guard me with Thy blessing  
Till Thy angels bid me home.

