

The Life of Charles Dickens: Champion for the Poor

Charles Dickens is one of the most famous writers in history, known for his vivid characters and dramatic stories that changed the way people thought about society.

But did you know that his own childhood was marked by hardship and poverty?

Charles was born in 1812 in England. His father, John Dickens, worked as a clerk—a job that meant long hours but not much money. The family often struggled to make ends meet. In 1824, when Charles was just twelve years old, his family’s debts caught up with them, and they were sent to a debtors’ prison called the Marshalsea. At the time, if you couldn’t pay your debts in England, you and your family could be locked away until you did.



While his parents and siblings lived in prison, Charles was forced to leave school and go to a workhouse where he was assigned to work in a factory that made boot polish. He pasted labels on jars for long hours every day. The factory was dark, dirty, and full of dangers. He never forgot the shame and misery he felt during this time.

These experiences shaped him deeply. When he was older, Charles found work as a reporter, covering debates in Parliament and writing for newspapers. His sharp eye for detail and talent for describing people helped him succeed. He began publishing stories under the name “Boz,” and his first big success was *The Pickwick Papers*. From there, he became one of the most famous writers in the world.

Charles Dickens used his books to expose important social issues. He wanted to call attention to the cruelty of child labor, the suffering of the poor, unfair laws, and even environmental problems that factories and pollution caused. His writing made readers think about how society treated its most vulnerable members.

One of his most famous books is *A Christmas Carol*. Since it was first published in 1843, it has never been out of print. It has been performed on screen and stage countless times and has influenced many holiday traditions. It tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a bitter, selfish old man who hates Christmas and cares only about money. On Christmas Eve, he is visited by the ghost of his former business partner who warns him to change his ways. Scrooge is then guided by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come, who show him the ripple effect that his greed and solitude have had on his own life and the lives of others. Shaken by these visions, Scrooge awakens on Christmas morning with a transformed heart.

With the book *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens wanted to bring to light serious social ills that plagued the poor during the 1840s in Victorian England. The 1840s were a time of extreme poverty and unemployment. Poor people received small amounts of money and food from government assistance. But in 1834, the Poor Law changed, and help for the poor was mostly given in workhouses. Dickens visited these workhouses and was horrified by the way children were treated. He decided to write a political pamphlet to raise awareness, but then he realized that writing a Christmas narrative would reach more people with “twenty thousand times the force!”

Dickens wrote and published *A Christmas Carol* in just six weeks. He paid the printing costs himself and printed it as a luxury item that would appeal to the middle class—bound in red cloth and illustrated. It was published on December 19, just in time for the Christmas season, and sold six thousand copies by Christmas Eve.

Even though Charles Dickens became one of the most well-known authors in the world, he made more from speaking gigs than from his books. He was an incredible performer and would read aloud his novels to audiences, acting out voices and scenes so powerfully that people laughed, cried, and applauded. His public readings were extremely popular, even in the United States, where crowds packed theaters to hear him.

Charles Dickens died in 1870, but his stories live on. He is remembered not only for his unforgettable characters and exciting plots, but also for shining a light on the struggles of the poor and inspiring people to make the world a better place.