

# CHARLES DICKENS

## LIFE (1812 - 1870)

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth in 1812. His father was imprisoned for debt and Dickens was sent out to work in a factory at the age of twelve. From 1832 he became a parliamentary reporter for various papers. In 1836 he married and in the same year he began publishing *The Pickwick papers*. The novel wasn't an immediate success, but when he introduced the character of the servant Sam Weller, sales increased, bringing Dickens both fame and money. Dickens combined his work as novelist with a number of other literary activities. From 1858 to 1867 he gave a series of highly popular public readings both in England and America. Dickens died in 1870 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

## ACHIEVEMENT

Dickens accepted the publishing conventions of his day. Readers didn't buy the completed novel, but read it in serial form. The novelist had to hold the reader's interest and so he often ended an issue on a note of suspense. As a result, Dickens's novel was full of climaxes, and crowned with superfluous characters and situations. These did not help the structure of the novel. However, no other writer was capable as Dickens of depicting the panorama of social change in Victorian England. This is due to Dickens's ability to create a host of typical characters, many of whom are caricatures. Dickens's best known works are:

- ***Sketches by Boz***, journalistic sketches containing episodes of everyday London life;
- ***The Pickwick Papers***, a series of adventures of a club of amateur sportsmen;
- ***A Christmas Carol***, a ghost story with a moral, set in the atmosphere of Christmas;
- ***David Copperfield***; full of autobiographical reminiscences;
- ***Oliver Twist***, in which, through the story of an orphan boy, Dickens attacks the workhouse system and denounces the degradation of poverty;
- ***The Old Curiosity Shop***, a pathetic story about the ill-treatment of children in the industrial age;
- ***Hard Times***, denouncing the wrongs of society and the terrible conditions of industrial workers;
- ***Great Expectations***, about the dramatic experience of a young boy.

## OLIVER TWIST

Dickens was not blind to the problems of his age and he spoke out with courage against them, protesting against the exploitation of children and the inhumanity of certain institutions. He drew much of the material in his novel from his own experience: he was a member of the lower middle class and he knew the hardship of the poor children, often forced into workhouses, as we can read in *Oliver Twist*. The novel is set in London in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Oliver is born in an English workhouse. Since his family is unknown, he spends some unhappy years there, starved and brutalized by the members of the Board and especially by Bumble, the parish beadle. Then Oliver runs away to London, where he falls into the hands of a gang of pickpockets. Their master teacher is Fagin who tries to turn Oliver into a thief. The boy is temporarily rescued by Mr Brownlow, but he is eventually kidnapped by the gang, whose interest in his retention has been increased by the offers of a mysterious person known as Monks. After various adventures, involving a lot of other character, the whole gang is finally brought to justice and punished. Oliver's parentage is disclosed and he finds he is related to Monks (his half-brother), who has been trying to rob him of his

fortune. In the end Oliver is adopted by Mr Brownlow and starts receiving that education which the workhouse had never provided for him.

## **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

*Great Expectations* charts the stages of formation and the changing social and personal influences acting on a young boy, Pip, as he grows to manhood and tries to rise above his humble social class, earn respect as a gentleman, and win the love of a young woman he has adored since his childhood. Philip Pirrip (Pip) as a boy has great expectations of becoming a gentleman. He is an orphan living in a village with his severe sister and her husband. He also frequents the house of Miss Havisham. Jilted by her lover on her wedding day, the woman has stopped all the clocks in the house, shut out all light from it and replaced it with candle light, and gone on wearing her by now yellowed bridal dress. In her house Pip meets Estella who disregards him as "common". Pip's great expectations come true when he is given a fortune by an unknown benefactor for him to receive a gentleman's education. He then moves to London, where he spends a life of idleness. On the day of his twenty-third birthday he receives the visit of Abel Magwitch. He learns from him that he is his benefactor and that the money used to finance his education was made in a penal colony. He also learns that Magwitch is Estella's father and the man whom Miss Havisham was supposed to marry. Knowing the true origin of his fortune and learning that Estella is going to marry a brutal man, Pip feels miserable. His dreams are fading away. He now tries to help Magwitch escape the death penalty, but fails. The man will eventually die in prison assisted by Pip. Eleven years later, he meets Estella, now a widow, and he is finally re-united with her.