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Introduction

CHARLES DICKENS was the best-known novelist of his time, and is considered by many to be the greatest writer of the Victorian era. A social reformer, Dickens wrote sprawling serial novels that chronicled and condemned the injustices of Victorian society. Yet he was also a deft entertainer and satirist, creating vivid characters, such as Scrooge, Miss Havisham, and Uriah Heep, who are still a part of our culture today. As David Lodge, who adapted the 1995 MASTERPIECE THEATRE production of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, says in Norrie Epstein’s *The Friendly Dickens* (Penguin, 2001), “Dickens’ observation of folly, affectation, hypocrisy, self-deception, deception of others, and the way in which people manipulate language to these ends just tickles one. Dickens does what comedy has always done: it both exposes imperfections in the world and reconciles us to it by making something entertaining out of it.”

Does Dickens still have something to say to us today? Use the activities and questions in this guide as you watch and read *The Tales of Charles Dickens*—the all-new 2009 MASTERPIECE adaptations of *Oliver Twist*, *Little Dorrit*, and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, as well as an encore presentation of *David Copperfield*, which originally aired in 2000.

Whether through characters who have counterparts in current pop culture, plot twists that eerily echo stories in our own newspapers, or the universal questions Dickens raises about the mysteries of the human heart, this guide is designed to help readers see Dickens’ relevance to our world today.
General Questions & Activities

**THESE ACTIVITIES** take a broad look at Dickens’ influence, both in his time and ours. Choose from the activities below either before, during, or after reading or viewing any Dickens book or film to give students more context, help them appreciate Dickens’ style, and encourage connections between Dickens’ time and our own.

**Dickensian**

Charles Dickens’ work continues to be so influential that the adjective “Dickensian” is used today to describe something “of or like the novels of Charles Dickens (especially with regard to poor social and economic conditions),” according to WordNet at [http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?d=dickensian](http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?d=dickensian). Search for current usages of the word in *The New York Times* archive at [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com) (put the term “Dickensian” in the search bar) or other newspapers in order to understand how “Dickensian” is used in different contexts. For example, a 2008 article in *The New York Times* describes Mumbai, India this way: “For the writer, the Dickensian lens offers an easy view of Mumbai: wealthy and poor, apartment-dwelling and slum-dwelling, bulboous and malnourished.” ([www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/weekinreview/09giridharadas.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/weekinreview/09giridharadas.html)) What contemporary work—novel, film, television series, blog, Web site—do you consider “Dickensian” in tone and/or content? What specific traits of the work do you find especially Dickensian? To what Dickens work would you compare it? Why?

**The Workhouse**

Read the two essays “Who Was Charles Dickens?” and “Down and Out in Victorian England” and answer the following questions: What was the philosophy behind workhouse relief for the poor? Why were families separated within the workhouse? Why were they fed meager rations? What was the attitude of most middle-class Victorians toward people in their society who lived in poverty? Then, consider current attitudes about poverty. Do we view the poor in our country in the same way we view the poor in less developed countries? Why or why not? Research current statistics about American poverty by visiting the U.S. Census Bureau's Web site at [census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html](http://census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/poverty.html). Which statistics do you find most surprising and why? Working in pairs, record an audio, video, or podcast interview, with one student playing the part of the interviewer and one student playing the part of Dickens himself. How would Dickens compare and contrast poverty in Victorian England to the current state of U.S. poverty?
A common misconception about Charles Dickens is that he was paid by the word. In fact, he was paid by the serial installment. Dickens was one of the first authors to popularize the serial; instead of turning out a massive novel affordable only to the upper classes, Dickens wrote his books in affordable serial installments that were available every month or week in popular periodicals such as *Bentley’s Miscellany*. Read Howard Cutler’s essay “Stay Tuned: The Rise of the Killer Serial” (see page 21) to learn more about how Dickens’ innovations in serial literature were related to Victorian literacy rates, the economy, and his popularity. Then, think about how you could transform one of Dickens’ complete novels back into a series, but this time as a miniseries for television. Where in this particular work are the “cliffhanging chapter stops” that Cutler describes? Which of these chapter endings would be most dramatic or visually exciting in a television or film format? Present a few of these moments in storyboard format to illustrate how a particular image or scene could leave viewers waiting in suspense for the next episode in the series.

Illustrating Characters

Dickens is perhaps more famous for his characters than for any other aspect of his work. According to *Everyone in Dickens* by George Newlin (Greenwood Press, 1995), Dickens created 13,143 separate characters. Each, no matter how minor, is delineated by some idiosyncrasy of speech, dress, or manner. To examine his craft more closely, do the following:

1. Choose a character from a Dickens novel and find 1–4 lines of description about him or her.
2. Write this description at the bottom of a blank sheet of paper.
3. Exchange papers with another student.
4. On the sheet you receive, sketch a drawing, cartoon, or caricature to illustrate the character described.
5. When everyone is finished, display all the drawings with the bottoms folded so that the writing doesn’t show. Have each writer guess which illustration matches the Dickens character he or she chose.

How hard or easy is it to find the correct drawing? How did Dickens’ vivid description give you a mental picture of each character? (To compare your work and see how Dickens’ characters have been envisioned by various illustrators over the years, visit David Perdue’s Charles Dickens Page at charlesdickenspage.com/illustrations.html.) Finally, unfold the bottoms of the pages and display the “cast of characters,” along with their descriptions.
Setting as a Theme Park or Map

Dickens’ London is a place so vivid and central to the plot of most of his novels that it is almost a character itself. To consider the effect of setting on his characters, plots, and themes, and to understand the Victorian world in which they lived, complete one of these two exercises:

1. Create an annotated map of Dickens’ London with descriptive words and phrases from one or more of the novels annotating key spots. This can be done individually or collaboratively via Google Maps (maps.google.com) so that you can input comments and quotes directly onto your map.

2. Create a blueprint for a “Dickens Theme Park” in which all the rides and concessions are inspired by the people and places in Dickens’ novels.

After you have finished, compare your work to actual versions. A traditional map of Dickens’ London can be found at both pbs.org/wnet/dickens/tour.html and fidnet.com/~dap1955/dickens/dickens_london_map.html. An interactive version is available at bbc.co.uk/arts/multimedia/dickens. To see how theme park creators envisioned “Dickens World” in England, visit dickensworld.co.uk.

Street Life

According to Norrie Epstein in The Friendly Dickens, walking through the streets of London was part of Dickens’ creative process: “Before he could begin a novel he would take to the city’s streets and walk as fast as he could for hours.” These long walks and the writing that resulted from them helped establish Dickens’ reputation as a flâneur (a French word meaning a connoisseur of street life). Take to the streets of your own town or neighborhood with notebook and/or camera in hand and become a connoisseur of the street life you observe. Capture the details you notice—the characters you encounter, the businesses and buildings you see, and the social conditions around you. Share your street life observations with fellow classmates by presenting a narrated multimedia slide show or video through Flickr (flickr.com) or through VoiceThread (voicethread.com).

Name Game

Consider the care with which Dickens named his characters: Uriah Heep, Ebenezer Scrooge, Mr. Murdstone, Miss Havisham, Abel Magwitch, and Wackford Squeers. In a 1995 New York Times op-ed column, writer Russell Baker, who introduced MASTERPIECE THEATRE’S David Copperfield (2000), proposed a parlor game for Dickens fans: “Compose a list of 10 well-known living people whose names would have caught Dickens’ eye. Describe the character Dickens would have created for each name. If you feel cocky, fit all 10 into a single plot Dickens might have written, and send to me.” Before you read the column in which he announces the winners, try the same game by yourself, with a partner or in a small group. Then visit this New York Times link to see how yours compares: http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE7DA1E3CF93BA25750C0A963958260&ei=Top/Reference/Topics/People/D/Dickens,%20Charles&scp=3&sq=Russell%20baker%20Dickens%20names&st=cse
The Rise and Fall of...

One theme that runs through most of Dickens’ novels is economic transformation. Characters who are wealthy icons are just as vulnerable to becoming penniless as the orphans who began life that way. For example, several wealthy characters in *Little Dorrit* lose their investments when the seemingly invincible institution Merdles Bank fails, due to the deceptive practices of Mr. Merdle.

As a class, create a series of book covers with the beginning title “The Rise and Fall of...” and ending with the name of a specific Dickens character. Each book cover should include a front-cover illustration that symbolically depicts the theme of economic transformation and an explanatory back-cover blurb that summarizes the factors that led to the character’s rise and fall. Were the characters’ moral decisions somehow related to their economic demise? If so, how? In each case, was virtue ultimately rewarded and vice punished? In other words, was poetic justice served? Finally, compare the economic plotline, or the rise and fall of the fortune of one of these characters, to a figure or institution in the news today. What stories of economic poetic justice can they find? How would they trace the “rise and fall” of this person or institution?

Victorian Vocabulary

Playing the classic game Dictionary with some Victorian-era words will help you more easily understand Dickens’ works. (You can find the rules for this game at the Educator’s Desk Reference at eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Language_Arts/Vocabulary/VOC0001.html) Definitions for the following Dickensian words can be found in the Dickens Glossary at charlesdickenspage.com/glossary.html. You can also add or substitute other words. Note that when a word has more than one meaning, the winning definition should be the one most commonly used in Dickens’ work.

**VICTORIAN-ERA WORD LIST**

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IT IS NOT SURPRISING that the novel that is probably Charles Dickens’ most famous was first met with controversy. Many Victorian readers believed that the violent and upsetting content of the novel was not appropriate for middle-class readers, but Dickens wrote the biting satire *Oliver Twist* to attack the same public policies regarding the poor that his own family was forced to endure. The novel’s main character—the young orphan Oliver—is born in a workhouse and then “raised” in London’s criminal underworld. Despite these harsh circumstances, Oliver remains an uncorrupted and virtuous child who is a victim of circumstances rather than his own moral failings. Although Dickens, as he says in the 1841 preface to the third edition of *Oliver Twist*, sought to show in Oliver “the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last,” two of the most engaging and complex characters in the novel turn out to be the prostitute Nancy and the juvenile pickpocket known as the Artful Dodger. Consequently, the heart of the novel lives within this problematic and sometimes false tension between purity and corruption.

BEFORE VIEWING

1. As a young orphan, Oliver Twist is forced to pick apart oakum (old ship’s ropes) in a workhouse, then barely escapes working as a chimney sweep only to find himself as an apprentice to an undertaker. Once he escapes these morbid circumstances, he is forced into a life of crime as a pickpocket and thief. Visit the Discovery Channel Web site at dsc.discovery.com/fansites/dirtyjobs/about/about.html to read about the “Dirty Jobs” television show, which profiles some of the messier jobs of our time. After viewing, you may want to create and record your own special episode of the show that concentrates on the “dirty jobs” portrayed in *Oliver Twist*. You can “air it” in a YouTube-style video.

2. Dickens’ novel inspired not only many film adaptations, but the creation of the well-known musical *Oliver!* as well. Find the lyrics to some of the songs from the musical online or at the library, or visit YouTube.com to watch video excerpts of different *Oliver!* productions. Based on the lyrics from the musical, what dominant themes do you think will emerge in the novel or film? When you view the film or read the novel, reflect back on your impressions of *Oliver!* How are the dominant themes treated differently in each artistic genre?

AFTER VIEWING

1. In this film version of *Oliver Twist*, Oliver seems to act alone as he courageously asks for more gruel; however, in Dickens’ original novel, Oliver is pushed into the action by his desperate workmates. Why do you think the director Coky Giedroyc chose to portray Oliver as acting alone? How are viewers’ perceptions of Oliver shaped by this pivotal scene? How might readers’ perceptions of Oliver differ based on Dickens’ description: “A council was held; lots were cast who should walk up to the master after supper that evening, and ask for more; and it fell to Oliver Twist”?

Fagin (Timothy Spall) and Oliver (William Miller) in Oliver Twist
2. One of Fagin’s boys refers to Oliver as “so jolly green.” Why does Oliver seem “green” to the other boys who have been living with Fagin? How does Oliver’s lack of experience show itself as he adjusts to the criminal underworld that Fagin controls? Does Oliver feel more at home with Fagin and the boys than he did at the workhouse or at Sowerberry’s shop? What do you think Dickens believed about the relationship between poverty and criminality? Do you agree with his perspective? How could some of these same themes apply to contemporary gangs?

3. Oliver felt that living in Mr. Brownlow’s house “seemed like Heaven itself.” What was so “heavenly” about Brownlow’s home? What point is Dickens trying to make by rendering Brownlow’s home in such ideal terms? Is Oliver attracted to Brownlow’s wealth or are there other reasons he wants to remain in Brownlow’s home?

4. Why does Nancy return Oliver to Fagin even though she knows that he will suffer in such an environment? Do Nancy’s later actions in defense of Oliver somehow make up for her previous actions? How is Dickens’ development of Nancy more complex or multi-faceted than his portrayals of Sikes, Brownlow, Rose, or even Oliver himself?

5. One could argue that Jack Dawkins—known as the Artful Dodger—functions as a character foil (someone who highlights aspects of the main character) to Oliver. Jack and Oliver were both brought up in poverty and are roughly the same age (although film versions often portray Jack as being older), but they exhibit vastly different perspectives on life. How do these two characters view life? How are their mannerisms and styles different? What point do you think Dickens makes by creating this contrast?

6. How does the greed of Mrs. Corney and Mr. Bumble jeopardize the fate of Oliver? Is the nature of their thievery any different than that of Fagin and his gang?

7. Nancy pays the ultimate sacrifice when she betrays Bill Sikes in order to expose Oliver’s true identity. As she tries to persuade Sikes to take mercy on her, she says, “It is never too late to repent.” Which characters are able to repent for their sins by the end of the novel? How do some characters pay for their lack of repentance?

8. Fagin is referred to as “the Jew” almost 300 times in the novel *Oliver Twist*, and Dickens’ portrayal of his character is commonly regarded as a reflection of the anti-Semitism that was prevalent in Victorian England. Do you think that the filmmaker Giedroyc perpetuates these prejudices and stereotypes or does she portray a more sympathetic character? In the film, how does Fagin’s refusal to renounce his faith shape viewers’ final impressions of him?

9. Dickens could have chosen to make Oliver the poor, orphaned son of parents who were also poor, yet he did not. Why do you think he gave Oliver an upper-class background? Does it weaken or strengthen Dickens’ message about reserving judgment of the poor?
1. Write or enact a debate between proponents of the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 and Victorian-era reformers who opposed the law. Both voices should use the life of Oliver Twist as evidence for their arguments. As you prepare, read “Down and Out in Victorian England” and consult additional library and Web resources. (The Peel Web site contains a summary and transcript of the law at historyhome.co.uk/peel/poorlaw/plaatext.htm.)

2. A police blotter is the written record of events and arrests, recorded at a police station, and then sometimes published in a local newspaper. Imagine that you are responsible for compiling criminal records for a police blotter column that will be published in a London newspaper during Oliver Twist’s time. Read some sample entries from a real police blotter in print or online (such as the Boston Herald’s Police Blotter at bostonherald.com/news/policy_logs/). Then record in detailed “police blotter” style all the crimes—petty and serious—committed by Fagin, Sikes, and members of their gang during the course of Oliver Twist.

3. The University of Virginia’s online e-text library has the 1838 publication of Oliver Twist, including George Cruikshank’s original illustrations, available on its Web site at etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/DicOliv.html. Choose a pivotal chapter from the novel and view the full-size Cruikshank illustration for that chapter by clicking on the small image that appears imbedded in the text. Write a critique of the drawing based on your own impressions of the scene. For example, how does the Chapter 2 illustration of Oliver asking for more gruel reveal the feelings of the other children of the workhouse? You may want to find a scene in the novel that you feel lacks an illustration and draw a Cruikshank-like representation of that scene with an appropriate caption.

He rose from the table, and advancing, basin and spoon in hand, to the master, said, somewhat alarmed at his own temerity—“Please, sir, I want some more.”

Oliver Twist
Of all my books, I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them… But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is DAVID COPPERFIELD.

—Charles Dickens, 1867

TOLD FROM A FIRST-PERSON point of view, David Copperfield is Dickens’ most autobiographical work, a classic bildungsroman that traces a boy’s struggle to find his place in the world and to master his “undisciplined heart.” Like all of Dickens’ novels, David Copperfield bursts with memorable characters (the ever-hopeful Wilkins Micawber, the creepy Uriah Heep) and probes the social injustices of the time. But David Copperfield is, most significantly, a book about memory. Through it Dickens confronts the most painful time in his own life—his experience working at a blacking factory when he was 12. Like David, who calls it “a period of my life, which I can never lose the remembrance of,” Charles Dickens (who shared the same initials as David Copperfield—D.C.—but reversed—C.D.) believed that this one experience marked him forever, which perhaps explains why there is a helpless or persecuted child at the center of so many of his novels. But in David Copperfield, which follows David’s journey from birth to a successful adult life as an author, it is David’s ability to use memory to make sense of and integrate all his experiences, whether happy or traumatic, that makes him, in the end, truly “the hero of [his] own life.”

BEFORE VIEWING

1. If you had to describe a person you know in just one sentence that would show or tell something unique about him or her, what would you write? David Copperfield is famous for Dickens’ scene-stealing secondary characters, many of whom he makes memorable through a signature catchphrase, a certain physical characteristic, a notable hobby, a pet peeve, or an accessory. The filmmakers have been faithful to the original novel by capturing what is unique about each of the characters. As you watch or read, write a one-line description of how Dickens has set each apart:

   | Miss Murdstone | Mrs. Micawber | Mrs. Gummidge |
   | Mr. Barkis    | Mr. Creakle   | Aunt Betsey Trotwood |
   | Wilkins Micawber | Uriah Heep  | Mr. Dick |
2. *David Copperfield* is a classic *bildungsroman* in which the main character grows from child to adult through a long and arduous journey of psychological, moral and social self-understanding. What factors from your past and family background do you think most make you who you are today? Why? Do you think the process of “coming into one’s own” means separating oneself from the expectations of other people, whether family or society in general? Why or why not? What other examples of this coming-of-age genre can you name?

3. To understand the art of translating a beloved literary work to the screen, visit the *Masterpiece* *David Copperfield* Web site to try the following exercise with a single scene from *David Copperfield* translated to screenplay and then to film. First, read the excerpt from the novel in which David meets his Aunt Betsey Trotwood as an adult. Then, thinking like a filmmaker, write a screenplay that reduces this lengthy passage to 2–3 pages of dialogue. Next, read the screenplay to compare it to your own. Finally, view the filmed scene to see how the filmmaker made the text come alive with acting, costumes, music, lighting, and scenery.

**AFTER VIEWING**

1. The famous first line of *David Copperfield* is, “Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.” How might this film be seen as a response to that first line? What five events from the novel or film *David Copperfield* would you choose as the most important in his quest? Why? In looking at these events, do you agree with writer Norrie Epstein in *The Friendly Dickens*, that “a major obstacle to [David’s] heroic stature is his tendency to subjugate his own idea of himself to the ideas others have about him”? Why or why not?

2. Not only was *David Copperfield* Dickens’ favorite book, it was also the book that was closest to his own life experience. How important do you think it is to know about an author’s life in order to understand his or her works? Do you think an artist can “work through” personal trauma via his or her art? How does the experience working in the blacking factory haunt Copperfield throughout the rest of his life? Click through the different personal and professional events that were influential in Charles Dickens’ life by visiting the “Interactive Flash Version of A Dickens Timeline” and click on “A Dickens Timeline.” Which events in Dickens’ life do you feel have echoes in *David Copperfield*? Why?

3. *David Copperfield* was Freud’s favorite novel. What do you know about Freud and his principles, especially the role of memory and the unconscious, and his Oedipus complex theory? (For background, you might visit Sigmund Freud—Life and Work at www.freudfile.org and click on “Theories.”) Why do you think this novel was so interesting to Freud? If David were a real person who visited a therapist in adulthood, what do you imagine the therapist’s report about him might say?

4. According to Norrie Epstein’s *The Friendly Dickens*, “The first and last words Dickens wrote as a novelist concern food. His first published short story was entitled, ‘Dinner at Poplar Walk,’ and the last word
he wrote in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* before his fatal stroke was ‘appetite.’” Consider the various dinner table scenes in the film, beginning with David’s dinner with Mr. and Miss Murdstone and David’s mother, including meals with the Micawbers, the Peggottys, and others, and ending with the dinner David and Dora attempt to cook for Mr. Micawber and his family. If the dinner scenes were the *only* sections of the novel or film that you were to read or see, how accurate and complete an understanding of this novel do you think you would have? Why? At which dinner would you most like to be a guest? Why?

5. Critic David Gates wrote about the secondary characters in *David Copperfield* in his Introduction to the Modern Library edition of the novel, an excerpt of which is available from Salon.com at archive.salon.com/books/feature/2000/12/13/copperfield/index1.html: “No writer since Shakespeare could have put together such a cast of scene-stealers.” Many famous actors take part in this film production, including Maggie Smith as Aunt Betsey, Daniel Radcliffe in his first screen role as the young David, Trevor Eve as Mr. Murdstone, Bob Hoskins as Mr. Micawber, and Ian McKellen as Mr. Creakle. Which of them do you think is the most successful “scene-stealer” in embodying the character as Dickens originally wrote it? Why? Although the role of Micawber was famously played by comic W.C. Fields in the 1930s, director Simon Curtis says he chose Bob Hoskins for the role in this film, in part because he “wanted to go with a real actor as opposed to a comic.” What do you think of this choice? Read a review of the film at culturevulture.net/Television/DavidCopperfield.htm to see how Curtis’s version of the story was received by film critic Bob Wake.

6. When told about his engagement to Dora, Aunt Betsey calls David “Blind! Blind! Blind!” about love. Do you think this is true? About what other relationships do you think he is “blind”? Consider, especially, his friendship with Steerforth, about whom he says, “I had never loved Steerforth better than when the ties that bound me to him were broken.” How, if ever, does David resolve this relationship?
1. In a famous scene in which he explains why he himself is forever in debt, Mr. Micawber instructs David, “Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure nineteen nineteen six, result happiness. Annual income twenty pounds, annual expenditure twenty pounds ought and six, result misery.” What does this dictum, which has become known as the “Micawber Principle,” and which comes from Dickens’ own Micawber-like father, mean? How do you think it applies to the way many Americans have grown accustomed to living? Select one day’s newspaper (in print or online) and find as many articles, advertisements, editorials, or other features to which this piece of advice might apply. Create a scrapbook of the pieces you collected. At the end, write a paragraph explaining how you think the Micawber Principle applies to our world today. What Micawber-like characters—those who always think something better is around the corner and spend accordingly—do you know? To what extent do you believe or live by this principle yourself?

2. One of the most famous novels in the bildungsroman genre is J.D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye, which opens with the main character, Holden Caulfield, talking to a psychiatrist: “If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.” Write a dialogue or series of emails, letters, texts, or instant messages between David and Holden (or any other character in a coming-of-age story, from Harry Potter to Scout in To Kill a Mockingbird to Amir in The Kite Runner). Stay true to the voices and points of view of the characters as you have them discuss the question, “Who am I, and what made me this way?” Where would the two agree and commiserate? What advice would one give the other? Why?

3. In an interview on the Masterpiece David Copperfield Web site, director Simon Curtis commented on the joys of casting this film: “Every single character in Dickens has something about him or her that’s very actable. Even if it’s just a one-line part, every character has a backstory and a life”. Who is your favorite character in David Copperfield? Why? Try to imagine a “backstory and a life” for one of the vivid secondary characters, such as Mr. Micawber, Uriah Heep, or Aunt Betsey by creating a mock social networking page for him or her. Who would his or her “friends” be? What interests would the character advertise? What would a typical “status report” be?

For additional activities, links, and resources, visit the Masterpiece David Copperfield Web site.
Although *Little Dorrit* is considered one of Charles Dickens’ “social novels,” many of the societal failings it criticizes had already been reformed by the time Dickens first published the novel in serial form from 1855 to 1857. Most notably, *Little Dorrit* exposes how detrimental English debtors’ prisons proved to be for the families who were sent to live there indefinitely; however, such prisons had been abolished even before Dickens first began to write the story of “little” Amy Dorrit (who was born and raised in the confines of the famous Marshalsea debtors’ prison). The following activities will help students dig deeper into Dickens’ motivation for writing such a novel—if not for reform purposes, what does the legacy of imprisonment symbolize for Dickens’ own past and for the lives of his characters? Clearly, one of the most significant messages of the novel seems to be that money—the key to escaping debtors’ prison—does not magically lead characters to escape their own neuroses. In fact, money seems to have its own imprisoning power.

**BEFORE AND AFTER VIEWING QUESTIONS**

**BEFORE VIEWING**

1. Living in a time when credit card debt and personal bankruptcy are so common that they are the subject of frequent television and radio ads, as well as news reports, it may be difficult to envision how personal debt once drove entire families into prison in 19th century England. In fact, it was Dickens’ own childhood experiences of the Marshalsea debtors’ prison that inspired him to create the character of Amy Dorrit—“the Child of the Marshalsea”—who was born within the walls of the Marshalsea, baptized by the jail’s turnkey (guard), and grew to think of the Marshalsea as her true “home.” Use library and online resources to research daily life within the Marshalsea, and then write a diary entry from the perspective of a child living there due to his or her parents’ debt. What would it be like to live in prison as a family? How would your perspective of the world be shaped by the experience? What conflicting feelings might you have toward your parents?

2. Read or skim the first few chapters of the novel *Little Dorrit* and note the dramatic setting shifts that take place (e.g., a prison cell in Marseille, a ship crossing the Atlantic, the Clennams household in London). Scriptwriter Andrew Davies chooses to open the film with a scene that occurred many years before the plot of the novel begins: the violent birth of Amy Dorrit in the Marshalsea debtors’ prison. Why do you think Davies chose to open with that scene instead of Dickens’ original setting in Marseille? What do these two scenes have in common? How does each opening setting establish a particular tone for the rest of the work? What is each writer emphasizing with his choice?
AFTER VIEWING

1. The theme of filial duty (loyalty to one’s parents) runs throughout *Little Dorrit*. What does it mean to be “filial” and how are characters’ actions shaped or not shaped by their desires to fulfill their filial duty? Why are some characters’ attempts to remain “filial” viewed differently by other characters? For example, Amy lives to serve her father and protect his “good name,” but why are her actions sometimes resented by her siblings and even by her own father after the family is out of debt? In your opinion, which characters fulfill their sense of filial duty and which characters defy such a role? Consider characters such as Arthur Clennams, Pet Meagles, and Edmund Sparkler.

2. The characters of Mrs. Merdle and Mrs. General are often seen in *Little Dorrit* as authorities on the subject of Society. What do you think Dickens means by his use of the word “Society”? Why do you think the word is always capitalized in the novel? Which characters in *Little Dorrit* seem to represent or speak for Society and which characters are excluded from such a distinction? What does it mean to live outside of Society? How does Dickens blur or undermine these distinctions in *Little Dorrit*?

3. The film *Little Dorrit* emphasizes the symbolic images of Arthur Clennam’s button and the pocket watch his father gave him to pass on to Mrs. Clennams. What does each of these symbols represent to different characters? Why is Amy seen secretly treasuring Arthur’s button? Why does she eventually fling it into the water in Episode 5? Why does Mrs. Clennam secretly gaze at the watch and its mysterious message? How are the subjects of both of these symbols revealed to Arthur by the end of *Little Dorrit*?

4. Throughout the course of *Little Dorrit*, Dickens reveals the nature of some existing marriages—the Flintwinches, the Meagles, the Merdles—and arranges for other marriages—Pet and Henry, Fanny and Edmund, and finally Amy and Arthur—to be formed. What brings these couples together? Does economics or convenience drive each marriage in *Little Dorrit*? Would Arthur have ended up with Amy if he had not fallen into debt? Does Dickens ever allow romantic love to triumph in the novel?

5. When Rigaud visits the house of Mrs. Clennams using the alias “Blandois,” he is struck by Mr. Flintwinch’s comment, “There are secrets in all families.” What secrets are the principal families in *Little Dorrit* concealing and how are they finally revealed? How does trying to keep this information secret affect the family members’ lives and relationships? How do Mrs. Clennams and William Dorrit’s attempts to conceal their past lives come back to haunt them psychologically?
1. In the book, Chapter 10 (“Containing the Whole Science of Government”) focuses on the Circumlocution Office, a fictional governmental agency Dickens created to satirize the corruption and inefficiencies he recognized in his own government. As he stated in the first paragraph of the chapter: “Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving—HOW NOT TO DO IT.” Explore the extended metaphor of the Circumlocution Office by thinking about what its name represents and how it is visually represented as an endless spiral staircase covered in scattered forms. Then, create an alternative metaphorical image to satirize a governmental agency or large bureaucracy today (e.g., a maze, a flowchart, a spider web). What name would best suit that institution and how would it operate?

2. When Amy rejects the proposal of her earnest suitor John Chivery, he mentally composes a new inscription for his tombstone: “Here lie the mortal remains of JOHN CHIVERY, Never anything worth mentioning, Who died...Of a broken heart, Requesting with his last breath that the word AMY might be inscribed over his ashes...” Write epitaphs for the characters that die during Little Dorrit, or even before the plot officially begins. You can begin each epitaph as Chivery does (“Here lie the mortal remains of...”) and include a brief statement of the significance of that character’s life or death. Epitaphs can be ironic or sincere in tone.
The Old Curiosity Shop

Published as a Serial from 1840–41 during the height of Dickens’ popularity with the general public, The Old Curiosity Shop tells the story of Little Nell, an innocent, 13-year-old girl who takes care of her grandfather and his curiosity shop (a kind of antique or secondhand store). When the grandfather, a gambler, is forced to borrow money from the evil Daniel Quilp, they lose the shop. Little Nell and her grandfather flee to the countryside where Quilp pursues them. In the next-to-last installment of the novel, Little Nell, reduced to begging, becomes dangerously ill. So worried were Dickens’ readers about what would happen next that they wrote to him by the thousands begging him not to let Nell die. According to the Victorian Web site at victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/index.html, “Daniel O’Connell, the great Irish member of Parliament, read the account of Nell’s death while he was riding on a train, burst into tears, cried ‘He should not have killed her,’ and threw the novel out of the window in despair… Crowds in New York awaited a vessel newly arriving from England with shouts of ‘Is Little Nell dead?’” Though few modern readers may be moved to the same extent by Little Nell herself, this story of a vulnerable and innocent girl threatened by evil is timeless.

Before Viewing

1. Has any book, film, television show, or other work of fiction in our time had a similar pull on the public imagination as the story of Little Nell had during Dickens’? If so, why do you think it was so popular? Who were its primary audience? How can you explain their investment in the plight of the hero or heroine?
2. Which do you generally find more interesting, villains or heroes? Why? What examples of memorable villains can you name? Dickens is a master at describing evil, repellent characters. Try your hand at filling in the following missing words to describe the loathsome Quilp, then compare your words to the ones Dickens chooses. How does your description differ? What new insights did you gain about Dickens’ style? Finally, note how the filmmaker brings this description to life in the film. How, especially, are Quilp’s odd oral fixations portrayed?

The child was closely followed by a/an (adj) _______ man of remarkably (adj) _______ features and (adj) _______ aspect, and so (adj) _______ in stature as to be quite a/an (noun) _______ , though his head and face were large enough for the body of a (noun) _______. His black eyes were (adj) _______, (adj) _______, and (adj) _______, … and his complexion was one of that kind which never looks (adj) _______ or (adj) _______. But what added most to the (adj) _______ expression of his face, was a/an (adj) _______ smile, which...constantly revealed the few (adj) _______ (plural noun) _______ that were yet scattered in his mouth, and gave him the aspect of a/an (adj) _______ (noun) _______. His dress consisted of a large high-crowned hat, a/an (adj) _______ dark suit, a pair of (adj) _______ shoes, and a/an (adj) _______ (adj) _______ neckerchief sufficiently (adj) _______ and (adj) _______ to disclose the greater portion of his (adj) _______ throat. Such hair as he had, was of a/an (adj) _______ black, cut short and straight upon his temples, and hanging in a/an (adj) _______ fringe about his ears. His hands…were very (adj) _______ ; his fingernails were (adj) _______ , (adj) _______ , and (adj) _______.
Original passage:

The child was closely followed by an elderly man of remarkably hard features and forbidding aspect, and so low in stature as to be quite a dwarf, though his head and face were large enough for the body of a giant. His black eyes were restless, sly, and cunning;...and his complexion was one of that kind which never looks clean or wholesome. But what added most to the grotesque expression of his face, was a ghastly smile, which...constantly revealed the few discoloured fangs that were yet scattered in his mouth, and gave him the aspect of a panting dog. His dress consisted of a large high-crowned hat, a worn dark suit, a pair of capacious shoes, and a dirty white neckerchief sufficiently limp and crumpled to disclose the greater portion of his wiry throat. Such hair as he had, was of a grizzled black, cut short and straight upon his temples, and hanging in a frowzy fringe about his ears. His hands...were very dirty; his finger-nails were crooked, long, and yellow.

AFTER VIEWING

1. The Old Curiosity Shop is a kind of fairy tale made vivid by dramatic contrasts, especially between innocent youth and corrupted age. Dickens said about writing the book, “I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of a child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her bed when her history is first foreshadowed.” How does the film contrast the “innocent face and pure intentions” of Little Nell with the “strange,” “uncongenial,” or “grim”? Draw a line down the center of a piece of paper and list the images, characters, scenes, lines, or other aspects of the film that belong on both sides. Which side do you think triumphs in the end? Why?

2. How does Little Nell function less as a fleshed-out character than as a perfect ideal of innocent girlhood that makes those around her look that much more grotesque? How is she a mirror for the other characters’ needs and desires? Do you think Little Nell is “too pure to live”? Of what other child heroes and heroines in Dickens does she remind you? Why do you think the basic storyline (an innocent girl on the brink of womanhood threatened by evil) is so perennially popular? Think of current books or movies that use this plot (for example, the Twilight novels by Stephenie Meyer). How do they elaborate on this same theme? How might you imagine a “Little Nell” character that would affect today’s audiences in the same way?

3. In a typical Dickens novel, darkness and pathos are relieved by flashes of the comic and absurd. What examples of this can you list from the film? How, for instance, does the scene in which Mrs. Quilp, Sampson Brass, and others discuss Mr. Quilp’s possible death work to relieve the tension of the previous scenes? How does it operate as foreshadowing (something that provides a hint as to future events)?

In a typical Dickens novel, darkness and pathos are relieved by flashes of the comic and absurd.
1. Though the death of Little Nell was devastating to the book’s Victorian audience, modern readers have generally found it mawkish and sentimental. Oscar Wilde said about it, as quoted in Richard Ellmann’s *Oscar Wilde* (Knopf, 1988), “One would have to have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears...of laughter.” Yet at the time it was written, almost half the deaths recorded in London were of children under the age of 10. With a partner, or in a small group, investigate period statistics, rituals, values, and attitudes towards death, particularly the death of children. In what ways, if any, were the Victorian traditions and viewpoints different from ours? Why do you think the loss of Little Nell was so compelling for Dickens’ audience? Compare and contrast the death scene of Little Nell to a death scene in a contemporary book, film, or play. How do the two scenes illustrate the similarities or differences between the two eras?

2. The “wovel” is a term coined by programmer Jesse Pollack to describe fiction that allows the reader to choose different plot directions and conclusions in order to take advantage of the new ways people are reading on the Web today. In an interview on National Public Radio (npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98503490&sc=ema1), publisher Victoria Blake explains that at the end of each weekly Web installment of the novel “there’s a binary plot branch point with a vote button at the end.” Once readers vote, the writer begins the next installment. Although Dickens ignored the hundreds of letters that poured in begging him to spare Little Nell’s life, imagine instead that he had taken readers’ pleas to heart and let her live. How would the book be different? Was Dickens right to not bow to reader pressure? Experiment with the wovel format yourself: write the beginning of an original story (perhaps using a typical Dickens theme), but end it at a critical turning point. Provide two to four choices for what should happen next and allow your classmates to vote. Finish the story based on their responses. Did they choose what you consider to be the best ending? Why or why not?
Stay Tuned:  
The Rise of the Killer Serial

by Howard Cutler

If he were alive today, he would be the king of film writers, with Hollywood at his feet.

—Hesketh Pearson, *Dickens, His Character, Comedy and Career* (Harper, 1949)

...Or would it be “the king of prime-time television with the Internet at his feet?”

A passing glance at the current TV lineup or the quickest of online searches will tell you that mass-media serial entertainment is alive and thriving in the new millennium. From soaps to reality series to online adventures, the situations and personalities we encounter in the modern serial have the power to preoccupy an entire society at work, at home, through the press, on TV, and by any other means available.

Blame it on Charles Dickens. He was the first to transform serial suspense into a large-scale social event. In the mid-1800s, it was the fate of a fictitious legal case—Jarndyce v. Jarndyce—that had everyone so engaged. And the reasons may have been much the same. Somehow a leisure-time entertainment had touched a nerve that ran deeper, exposing uncomfortable contradictions in society’s view of itself. The art form of serial fiction provided a safe and fascinating arena to play that conflict out.

Child of Technology

When *Oliver Twist*’s first episode “launched” in January of 1837, Charles Dickens was a very young (age 25) and very hot new talent in the only mass medium that existed: print. The newly-appointed editor of the monthly periodical *Bentley’s Miscellany*, he had complete creative control. He had earned that freedom because he had begun to make his backers very rich. And serial fiction was how he was able to do it.

It wasn’t his invention, of course. Homer knew perfectly well how to sing Odysseus into a tight spot each night to ensure his own place at the next day’s banquet. But Homer’s audience was a small, select elite, distribution depended upon his own two feet, and copy protection was not an issue—his genius was unique—until the advent of the written word.

Every new form of mass entertainment is the child of technology in some respect. The birth of the serial blockbuster was no exception.

What Dickens had in common with such successors as David Chase (*The Sopranos*), Shonda Rimes (*Grey’s Anatomy*), Marc Cherry (*Desperate Housewives*), and J.J. Abrams, Jeffrey Leiber, and Damon Lindelof (*Lost*), was a new wave of technology to ride, a huge potential audience to tap, the temperament to
exploit the opportunity, and a business model to drive it. For TV serial dramas advertiser-supported network television would provide the wave. Inspired by the explosive success of Mark Burnett’s *Survivor* and Simon Fuller’s *American Idol*, the rise of reality TV series has also fed the public demand for serialized entertainment.

Increasingly, both serial dramas and reality shows have used the Web to create content, inspire their fan base, excite viewers’ interest in and devotion to their show, and as a method of distribution that can reach beyond television. Writers from Stephen King (*The Green Mile*) to Alexander McCall Smith (*Corduroy Mansions*) to a vast array of writers are using blogs and other online methods to post serialized fiction. Victoria Blake publishes online “wovels,” a term coined by programmer Jesse Pollack to describe fiction that allows the reader to choose different plot directions and conclusions. DailyLit.com, which claims over 140,000 subscribers, is just one of many Web sites that offer readers “short, customized installments” of well-known books, sent via email or RSS feed to a computer or other mobile device.

**New Stimulus through Print**

For Dickens, the breakthroughs were a wave of recent innovations in publishing technology that radically lowered production costs and the price to the end user. Cheaper, faster paper manufacture, steel-plate mass reproduction of illustrations, advances in automated typesetting, and the steam-powered cylindrical printing press were all introduced between 1800 and 1830.

Then there was literacy, or, as we might think of it today, market penetration. We measure the reach of television and the Web by the number of devices in consumers’ homes. In the 1830s, reach would have been measured by the percentage of the population that could read, and that number was growing in every stratum of society.

Increase in population and a rise in real wealth, however unequally distributed, were at the back of it. A growing middle class living in greater comfort with more leisure time fueled an appetite for new stimulus through print. And much as today’s parents strive to foster their children’s computer skills, so the public in Dickens’ day viewed the necessity to master the technology of reading. Plus, the rapid growth of dense urban population centers meant that new trends and enthusiasms could ripple through society more quickly.

What did this expanding audience really want? They wanted pictures as well as words—that was clear—and they wanted cheap. By the early 1830s, profusely illustrated penny weeklies like Charles Knight’s *Penny Magazine* were all the rage. But as print technologies lowered barriers to entry, a surplus of product developed. By the middle of the decade the English publishing industry was in a slump. Did readers of the 1830s also feel there were 500 channels with nothing on? As networks do today, publishers agonized over ways to capture and sustain audience loyalty.
Dickens and The Serial

Onto this scene arrived the intensely ambitious young Dickens, a driven man who had never known economic stability or respectability and badly wanted both. He craved fame as well. In his teens he had dreamed of stardom on the stage and studied for it as much as his meager purse would allow, but his gift found outlet first through the printed word.

His first successes were mere sketches, published (gratis) under the pen name “Boz,” but they caught the public’s fancy. The next step was more “high concept”: a comic series of continuing misadventures involving the members of the so-called Nimrod Club, to be published monthly at a shilling apiece. Behind this scheme was a pair of start-up publishers, Chapman and Hall, who proposed teaming young Dickens with an established star illustrator, Robert Seymour.

Dickens didn’t think much of the initial idea, but he improved on it. The enterprise got off to a very shaky start nonetheless. The first episode of The Pickwick Papers sold only 400 copies, and soon after, Seymour committed suicide following a heated dispute with Dickens over creative issues.

Dickens was tenacious, however, and, more important, he had the common touch, that rarest of gifts which enabled him to be understood and loved by men and women at all stations of life. He brought onboard a new illustrator, “Phiz” (real name: Halbot K. Browne), and somehow, together, they captured the exact national mood of the moment. By the time The Pickwick Papers ended its run in November of 1837, circulation had soared to 40,000 per month, a huge number for the day, and Chapman and Hall were rich men.

Pickwick Hats, Coats, Canes, and Cigars

But something else had happened as well, a kind of cultural mania. Its detractors even called it “Boz-o-mania.” We’d have to look to the original release of Star Wars, Harry Potter, or The Lord of the Rings to find a comparable moment in our modern media culture. There were Pickwick hats, coats, canes, and cigars—a kind of product-licensing boom, except that there were no licenses to grant and no laws to protect Dickens’ interest in the exploitation of his new “brand.” Some claimed that Pickwick’s name was better known than the prime minister’s. People named their pets after Dickens’ characters, and catch phrases from the series entered common usage.

Looking back, what we see is the power of mass distribution and artistic genius combined. Here are the first symptoms of a mass-media culture at work. If anyone in Victorian England exercised the hold on the public imagination that a George Lucas or Steven Spielberg or J.K. Rowling does today, it was certainly Charles Dickens. At this point the public was ready for anything Dickens had to say, and he was in a position to cash in at last. His backers might have preferred Pickwick II, but instead, he took them—and most of the English reading public—in an entirely new direction.

A Far Less Comfortable Experience

Artist that he was, Dickens delved into the darkest days of his own unhappy childhood to fashion a melodramatic nightmare that would hold his public spellbound. The Pickwick Papers had been a comic joyride; Oliver Twist would
be a far less comfortable experience. This time the plot was tightly tuned to extract every ounce of suspense. Every frustrated theatrical instinct Dickens had ever nurtured he now unleashed through a host of characters only Shakespeare could have equaled. While entertaining his vast audience extravagantly, he also confronted them with their own complacency, with each new monthly installment demanding that they reexamine their poor laws, their institutions, their orthodox morality, and their assessment of human nature in general.

In effect, he held them hostage for two years in the slums of London before “reawakening” them with the obligatory happy ending.

It’s arguable that the serial novel as Dickens practiced it was the first true form of mass-media home entertainment. Certainly it played a role in people’s lives, not unlike TV serials do today.

Henry James tells a story of sneaking into the living room as a young child and hiding under a table to listen to Dickens’ *David Copperfield* being read by his father to his mother, older brother, and sister. During the scene in which David is cruelly abused by his stepfather, young Henry broke out in uncontrollable sobs, and he was escorted from the room, deemed too young for such lurid fare. This story gives some idea of the compelling hold these novels had on families in that age.

In fact, there was much debate about the appropriateness of *Oliver Twist* for respectable folk. “There is a sort of radicalish tone about *Oliver Twist* that I don’t altogether like,” wrote one critic. Novelist William Thackeray, a rival of Dickens’, asserted that men of genius “had no business to make these characters interesting or agreeable, to be feeding their readers’ morbid fancies, or indulging their own, with such monstrous food.”

**Amazed or Appalled**

But if everyone in your immediate circle were caught up in the story and speculating on its outcome, wouldn’t you spend a shilling to investigate the next episode? And everyone was discussing *Oliver Twist*, from the newly-crowned teenage Queen Victoria (who said she disapproved of the novel for younger readers, but read on herself anyway) to Prime Minister Lord Melbourne (“...all about workhouses and coffin makers and pickpockets... I don’t like that low and debasing view of mankind”) to those who could never afford to buy the novel whole, but who could readily identify with the reality it described. All England found itself caught up in the tale of the lonely and mysterious orphan at the mercy of the parish welfare system. Critics themselves could only stand amazed or appalled, quote at length (to increase their own readership), and speculate about what might happen next.

And so, surely, did Dickens, who, unlike his predecessors, wrote his serialized novels on the fly, beginning their publication before the outcome was clear in his mind. “I am quite satisfied that no one can have heard what I mean to do with the different characters in the end,” he wrote about *Oliver Twist* in the middle of its run. “At present, I don’t quite know myself.”

In this approach, he was the true ancestor of today’s writers of prime-time television. The pressures he experienced must have been much the same as theirs today. He monitored the public’s reaction to the story as it unfolded and adjusted the balance of the tale accordingly. He also knew the anxiety of writing to deadline, relying on inspiration and momentum to carry him through to a
satisfactory conclusion. “I can never write with effect, especially in a serious way, until I have got my steam up, or in other words until I have become so excited with my subject that I cannot leave off.”

A Truly Viable Profession

 Oliver Twist changed the entire structure of the Victorian publishing business. The first episode of Dickens’ next serial novel, Nicholas Nickleby, launched before Oliver Twist even finished, sold 50,000 copies on its first day of publication—probably as startling a number to Victorians as the idea of tens of millions of viewers tuning in for the final episode of any popular TV serial is to us today. Henceforth all of Dickens’ novels and many of the century’s other literary masterpieces by William Thackeray, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, and even Leo Tolstoy, were serialized.

The change was both good and bad. On the one hand, many who might never have read did read, and the audience for substantial literature grew. On the business side, writing fiction became a truly viable profession because profits increased. Not only did novels sold on the installment plan net more income during their run, but the episodic presale acted as a powerful promotion for the purchase (and rental) of the complete, bound version when it was eventually published. The cycle worked much the way film distribution does today, where theatrical release drives home video sales and rentals. Dickens may well have established fiction writing as a respectable profession, not so much by his artistry as by proving that it was possible to get rich at it—as rich as any doctor or lawyer.

Creatively, however, the enormous success of the serialized novel may have been a mixed blessing. Many critics and authors thought so. The very devices that made them so compelling—cliffhanging chapter stops and melodramatic crises—tended to distort overall dramatic structure. In addition, the creative control that had been so necessary for the genesis of Oliver Twist ebbed away as publishers adopted the role that studio executives do today. Since they were absorbing the financial risk and controlling distribution, they felt fully entitled to help shape the initial concept with less established authors and intervene mid-course if sales began to sag or the public took offense.

Technology Offers New Ways to Create

Who can say what Dickens would have made of today’s mass-media entertainment business? He would certainly recognize and know how to deal with much of it. The legal wrangles over copy protection would be no surprise; he faced plenty of outright piracy in his day, and there was no effective legal recourse. Now we rage about copyright violation in China. In Dickens’ day the chief villain was America.

He would no doubt be enthusiastic about technologies that offered him new ways to create exciting entertainment, and he would likely use those forms to make social statements as well as to entertain. We can also be pretty sure he would find a way to work the system to his financial advantage. He was a sharp negotiator who knew how to leverage his own value. It’s also a safe bet that today’s multinational media conglomerates would find ways to make billions from the exploitation of his unique gifts. The Dickens “brand” would be as sure-fire as John Grisham, Walt Disney, or Oprah Winfrey is today. The ultimate beneficiaries would be us, of course, still waiting to see just how the whole thing finally turns out.

**Resources**

**THE MASTERPIECE WEB** Site is rich in resources about Charles Dickens, including information on previous Dickens productions. For information and additional links, visit Dickens and MASTERPIECE THEATRE.

**WEB SITES**

**British Social Policy, 1601–1948**
http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/publicpolicy/introduction/historyf.htm#1834

This site contains a comprehensive chronicle of the British Poor Laws, starting with the Elizabethan Poor Laws of 1601 and continuing on through modern social policies of the 1940s. This site provides helpful background information on the Poor Law of 1834 and Public Health Acts of the Victorian period.

**Charles Dickens**
helsinki.fi/kasv/nokol/dickens.html

This vast array of Dickens-related material—regarding his life, family, work, homes, and more—was compiled by a Finnish scholar (text is in English).

**Charles Dickens Gad’s Hill Place**
perryweb.com/Dickens/index.html

This eclectic Web site provides information about Dickens’ home, Gad’s Hill, as well as daily quotes, biographical information, crossword puzzles and character matches, online texts, and more.

**A Charles Dickens Journal**
dickenslive.com/

This site provides an extensive exploration of Dickens’ life presented as a year-by-year biography, starting in 1812 and concluding in 1870.

**The Charles Dickens Museum**
dickensmuseum.com/

This museum, the only surviving London home of Dickens, opened in 1925. It houses a large collection of Dickens-related items.

**Conservation of Charles Dickens’ Manuscripts**
www.vam.ac.uk/nal/publications/dickens/index.html

This site details the restoration of a collection of Dickens manuscripts by the Victoria and Albert Museum. The restoration project covers 33 years of Dickens’ writing, from *Oliver Twist*, the earliest, to the still-unfinished *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Read how curators discovered cancelled text and correction slips sealed in the original manuscripts.

**David Perdue’s Charles Dickens Page**
charlesdickenspage.com

Compiled by a Dickens enthusiast, this site includes illustrations, maps, a timeline, extensive Web links, and information about Dickens’ work and his travels to America.
**The Dickens Project Essay Contest**

The Dickens Project offers an annual High School Student Scholarship Essay Contest. Two high school students and their teachers can win a scholarship to study Dickens at The Dickens Universe, a conference of scholars and the general public, hosted each summer by the University of California, Santa Cruz. Students enter the contest by submitting an essay on a specific topic. The winning essays are published on The Dickens Project Web site and circulated at The Dickens Universe. For complete information on how to enter, including entry deadlines, visit The Dickens Project Web site at [http://dickens.ucsc.edu/high_school/highschool_guidelines.html](http://dickens.ucsc.edu/high_school/highschool_guidelines.html).

**Dickens**

[pbs.org/wnet/dickens/](http://pbs.org/wnet/dickens/)

This PBS site is a companion to a three-part documentary series about the life and career of Charles Dickens. It provides scholarly essays about the celebrated author, lets you test your knowledge of Dickens, and explore his city, and find links and bibliographic information.

**The Dickens Fellowship**

[dickensfellowship.org](http://dickensfellowship.org)

The Dickens Fellowship is a worldwide association of people with an interest in the life and works of Dickens. The Web site offers information on local chapters, its annual conference, and the journal *The Dickensian*.

**The Dickens Project**

[http://dickens.ucsc.edu](http://dickens.ucsc.edu)

The Dickens Project of University of California sponsors an annual conference for university-level scholars of Dickens and features a student essay contest for high school students.

**Discovering Dickens: A Community Reading Project**

[dickens.stanford.edu/index.html](http://dickens.stanford.edu/index.html)

This Stanford University-sponsored site has special editions of *Hard Times*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations*, along with extensive maps, illustrations, and glossary information.

**Our Mutual Friend: The Victorian Poorhouse**

[http://dickens.ucsc.edu/OMF/spencer.html](http://dickens.ucsc.edu/OMF/spencer.html)

This is an informative essay on the Victorian poorhouse, written by Sandra Spencer of the University of North Texas.

**The Peel Web**

[historyhome.co.uk/peel/peelhome.htm](http://historyhome.co.uk/peel/peelhome.htm)

Maintained by Dr. Marjorie Bloy, this site is a resource for researching the historical context of Dickens’ novels. It contains many primary documents that are relevant to Dickens’ political interests—specifically, a topic page that focuses on the Poor Law of 1834.

**Project Gutenberg**

[http://promo.net/pg/index.html](http://promo.net/pg/index.html)

This site includes online texts of many of Dickens’ works.

**Salon: “Portrait of the Artist as a Minor Character”**


From the salon.com archives, this is an excerpt of critic David Gates’s Introduction to the Modern Library’s edition of *David Copperfield*.

**University of Virginia Library: Electronic Text Center**

[etext.lib.virginia.edu/collections/languages/english/](http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/collections/languages/english/)

The Modern English Collection of manuscripts contains e-text versions of most of Dickens’ novels, including original illustrations.

**The Victorian Web**

[victorianweb.org](http://victorianweb.org)

The Victorian Web contains a Dickens page that offers essays and commentary about diverse topics related to Dickens’ work (e.g., gender, economic contexts, science, imagery, themes, and characterization).


*Illustration from David Copperfield by Phiz*
Credits

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