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Life and times of Charles Dickens

FOCUS

- To gain insight into the themes of *Great Expectations* by learning about Dickens' life.

Introduction

The events in Charles Dickens' own life had a great effect on his writing, and he could never forget the difficulties he and his family had gone through.

- Read this selection of facts about Charles Dickens' life.

Charles Dickens was born in Portsmouth in 1812. His father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. There were eight children in the family, and they lived variously in Portsmouth, in London and in Chatham.

The family suffered many financial crises, and at the age of 12 Charles was sent to work in a factory, sticking labels on bottles for six shillings a week. Eventually John Dickens was arrested for debt and sent to the debtors' prison, where he was forced to live with his entire family – with the exception of Charles, who visited them in the prison every Sunday.

Later Charles was able to attend school, where he did well. He became a freelance reporter and, eventually, a novelist.



- Great Expectations* is sometimes called 'Dickens' most autobiographical novel'. Using the information above, find the parallels between Dickens' life and the themes in *Great Expectations*, and fill in the chart below.

Dickens' own life	Themes and events in <i>Great Expectations</i>

- Great Expectations* is set, not in the 1860s when it was written, but in the early part of the century. Why do you think Dickens chose to do this?

Child labour in nineteenth-century England

FOCUS

- To gain awareness of the extent of child labour in England in the nineteenth century.

Introduction

At the age of 12 Charles Dickens was sent to work in a London factory, pasting labels on bottles. He used this experience in *David Copperfield*. Read this extract.

Murdstone and Grinby's warehouse was at the waterside. It was a crazy old house with a wharf of its own, abutting on the water when the tide was in, and on the mud when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats. Its panelled rooms, discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say, its decaying floors and staircase, the squeaking and scuffling of the old grey rats down in the cellars, and the dirt and rottenness of the place, are things not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant.

I know that a great many empty bottles were one of the consequences of their traffic, and that certain men and boys were employed to examine them against the light, and reject those that were flawed, and to rinse and wash them. When the empty bottles ran short, there were labels to be pasted on full ones, or corks to be fitted in them or seals to be put upon the corks, or finished bottles to be packed in casks. All this work was my work, and of the boys employed upon it I was one.



1. In 1857 Prince Albert (the husband of Queen Victoria) said that, for the working man, children were 'part of his productive power', and that if the children of working families were not allowed to work, it would 'almost paralyse their domestic existence'. Discuss what this tells us about the attitude of adults towards children in the nineteenth century.

This letter was published in the *Leeds Mercury* in 1830.

... thousands of our fellow-creatures and fellow-subjects, both male and female, the inhabitants of a Yorkshire town ... are at this very moment existing in a state of slavery more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system – colonial slavery ... they are compelled, not by the cart-whip of the slave-driver, but by the dread of the equally appalling thong or strap of the overlooker, to hasten half-dressed to those magazines of British Infantile Slavery – the Worsted Mill of Bradford! Thousands of little children are daily compelled to labour, from six o'clock in the morning to seven in the evening with ... only thirty minutes allowed for eating and recreation ...

- In 1833 the Factory Act was passed. No child under nine was allowed to work; children aged nine to 12 could work up to nine hours a day, and must have at least two hours of schooling.

2. In Chapter 4 of *Oliver Twist* Dickens describes the fate of a parish apprentice:

If the master finds, upon a short trial, that he can get enough work out of a boy without putting too much food into him, he shall have him for a term of years, to do what he likes with.

Read the rest of Chapter 4 of *Oliver Twist* and then write a short comparison between Oliver's experience as an apprentice, and Pip's experience as an apprentice at the hands of Joe in *Great Expectations*.

Crime and punishment

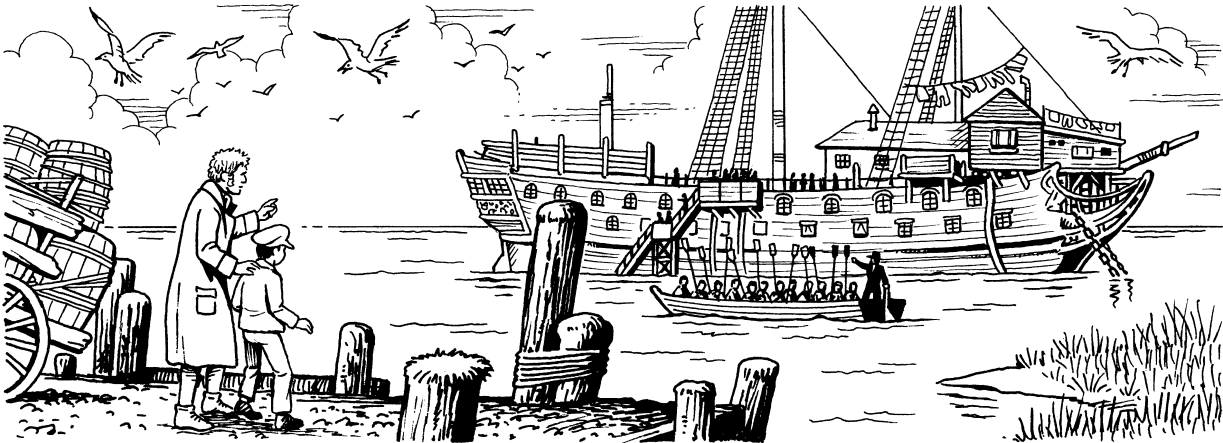
FOCUS

- To consider some of the forms of punishment meted out to prisoners in the early nineteenth century.

Introduction

By 1860, when *Great Expectations* was written, some of the forms of punishment it details were already abolished. Prisoners were treated humanely by the standards of the time; many people complained that reforms had gone too far and that prisoners were better fed and housed than people outside, which was an incentive to commit crime so that the ‘comforts’ of prison could be enjoyed.

- Prison hulks were ships which were no longer fit for service; they were used as offshore prisons. The last prison hulk ended its days in 1857. Discuss the advantages of using ‘hulks’ as prisons.



- On Pip's arrival in London (Chapter 20) he sees preparations for a public hanging. Public hanging was abolished in 1868, and capital punishment was finally abolished in 1965. Discuss why public hanging was considered a good thing.
- Pip is shown ‘the Debtors’ Door, out of which culprits came to be hanged’. Debtors were punished by imprisonment, or even death. In 1824 Dickens’ father, John Dickens, was imprisoned for debt. Discuss whether you think imprisonment is an appropriate or effective punishment for people who get into debt.
- Transportation (shipping offenders to colonies overseas) lasted until the 1840s. Discuss what you think are the good and bad features of transportation from the point of view of:
 - the authorities
 - the offenders.
- Dickens sets his novel at a time before prison reforms. Write down the reasons you think he might have had for doing this. (Think of the plot of the story – the life of Magwitch, for example – as well as Dickens’ own background and his concern for social conditions.)

Poverty

FOCUS

- To examine the causes of poverty in the early nineteenth century.

Introduction

During the war with France (1793–1809) corn ships were blockaded, so corn prices were high. This made the farmers prosperous, although for the poor it meant expensive bread. After the war, prices fell. Farmers faced more difficult times, so agricultural labourers were paid low wages or lost their jobs.

- After 1815 factories producing war goods such as munitions or uniforms were forced to find new markets; many went out of business.
- Tariff barriers were erected against British goods by continental governments.
- The industrial revolution increasingly meant that skilled craftspeople, such as weavers, found that machines were taking over their work. In the countryside threshing machines were used, and thousands of agricultural workers were laid off.
- Descriptions of poverty frequently appeared in the novels of Charles Dickens, and he was a strong campaigner for better conditions. Read this extract from *The Old Curiosity Shop*.



Damp, rotten houses, many to let, many yet building, many half-built – and mouldering away – lodgings, where it would be hard to tell which needed pity most, those who let or those who came to take – children, scantily fed and clothed, spread over every street, and sprawling in the dust – scolding mothers, stamping their slipshod feet with noisy threats upon the pavement – shabby fathers, hurrying with dispirited looks to the occupation which brought them ‘daily bread’ and little more – mangling-women, washerwomen, cobblers, tailors, chandlers, driving their trades in parlours and kitchens and back rooms and garrets, and sometimes all of them under the same roof – brickfields skirting gardens paled with staves of old casks, or timber pillaged from houses burned down, and blackened and blistered by the flames – mounds of dock-weed, nettles, coarse grass, and oyster shells heaped in rank confusion – small dissenting chapels to teach, with no lack of illustration, the miseries of earth, and plenty of new churches, erected with a little superfluous wealth, to show the way to heaven.

1. Discuss whether or not you find anything unusual about the way this extract is written. (Look carefully at the punctuation!) Does this make the description more or less effective?
2. Dickens frequently includes scenes of poverty in his novels. Discuss whether or not you think this is an effective way of campaigning for better conditions.