

## The Victorian Age (1830 - 1900)



### Historical Background

At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century British scientist Richard Trevithick and American inventor Oliver Evans devised successful engines using high-pressure steam. This invention alongside the development of other machinery towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century introduced the Industrial Revolution which gathered force as the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, creating profound changes in the British society and in the personality of the English nation. Small villages and cottages were replaced, within a hundred years, by factories with inexpensive newspapers, linked by railroads and steamboats, and machinery for mass production. The position of the landed aristocracy gradually diminished in importance as the middle class industrialists grew in numbers and in fortune; and the rural peasantry dwindled while the number of wage-earning laborers grew in the towns.

Social conditions for most of the population were grim; people were forced to live together in crowded, unsightly and uncomfortable buildings. The factories in which they worked were dirty and dangerous, and they had to put in long hours of hard work. Women and children were exploited at work, wages were unfair and unemployment was high. It was only at the end of the century that the mass of workers were to be considered humanely. It was only then that the right to vote was extended to the common man. It was under

these terrible social circumstances that Karl Marx developed his economic theories of Socialism, which gradually became popular as the century progressed. A number of other authors also brought the predicament of the men, women and children who were suffering due to the abominable circumstances in which they lived, were educated and worked to attention. Charles Dickens was one of the best known and studied of these social critics.

The quick pace of invention and development of machinery during the Victorian Age brought on the need for many new words to refer to these machines. The coining of such words as '*telegraph*', '*typewriter*' and '*gramophone*' by scientists and manufacturers, was criticized by grammarians who felt that etymologists should be responsible for the formation of new words using Greek and Latin sources. However as the language developed, the words that were needed were invented ignoring the sense of 'correctness'. By the end of the Victorian era practically 500,000 words had been added to the English language.

American English also grew during this period, however, due to the geographical distance of the 2 continents different words were often used to refer to the same object. Some words relating to the railroad for instance can be observed:

American	British	American	British
railroad	railway	car	carriage
conductor	guard	track	line
fireman <sup>1</sup>	stoker	freight <sup>2</sup>	goods

### Social Critic; Charles Dickens (1812 - 1870)

English novelist and one of the most popular writers in the history of literature. In his enormous body of works, Dickens combined masterly storytelling, humor, pathos, and irony with sharp social criticism and acute observation of people and places.

Dickens was born in Portsmouth. When his father was imprisoned for debt in 1824, Dickens was forced to support himself by working in a shoe-polish factory. A resulting sense of humiliation and abandonment haunted him for life, and he later described this experience, only slightly altered, in his novel *David Copperfield*. In 1833 Dickens published the first of a series of original descriptive sketches of daily life in London, using the pseudonym Boz. A London publisher commissioned a volume of similar sketches to accompany illustrations by celebrated artist George Cruikshank. The success of this work, *Sketches by Boz*, led to the proposal of a similar publishing venture. Dickens transformed this particular project from a set of



loosely connected vignettes into a comic narrative, *The Pickwick Papers*. Its success made him famous and began the soon-popular form of publishing novels in inexpensive monthly installments.

Dickens also edited weekly periodicals, wrote travel books, administered charitable organizations, managed a theatrical company, and pressed for many social reforms. His novels include *Nicholas Nickleby*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Bleak House*, *Great Expectations*, *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Times*, and *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Rather than being a social philosopher Dickens is an emotional critic who used the background of the English society as a source of themes for his books. This is why most of his books are still read today. As did Chaucer and Shakespeare, Dickens portrayed the infinite variety of human life, and the people he included in his novels were none alike and all were interesting.

Although many of his characters are fictional and exaggerated to the point of caricature, they still remain human and convincing.

*David Copperfield* is largely an autobiographical story in which Dickens attacks the brutality in Victorian schools. In the following passage of the novel, David recalls his experiences at a small English boarding school.

## 'DAVID COPPERFIELD'

... I gazed upon the schoolroom into which he took me as the most forlorn and desolate place I had ever seen. I see it now. A long room with three long rows of desks, and six of forms, and bristling all round with pegs for hats and slates<sup>3</sup>. Scraps of old copy-books and exercises litter the dirty floor. Some silkworms' houses made of the same materials are scattered over the desks. Two miserable little white mice, left behind by their owner, are running up and down in a fusty castle made of pasteboard and wire, looking in all the corners with their red eyes for anything to eat. A bird, in a cage very little bigger than himself, makes a mournful rattle now and then in hopping on his perch, two inches high, or dropping from it; but neither sings nor chirps. There is a strange unwholesome smell upon the room, like mildewed corduroys, sweet apples wanting air, and rotten books. There could not well be more ink splashed about it, if it had been roofless from its first construction, and the skies had rained, snowed, hailed, and blown ink through the varying seasons of the year .

. . . School began in earnest next day. A profound impression was made upon me, I remember, by the roar of voices in the schoolroom suddenly becoming hushed as death when Mr. Creakle entered after breakfast, and stood in the doorway looking round upon us like a giant in a story-book surveying his captives.

Tungay stood at Mr. Creakle's elbow. He had no occasion, I thought, to cry out, "Silence!" so ferociously, for the boys were all struck speechless and motionless.

Mr. Creakle was seen to speak and Tungay was heard<sup>4</sup>, to this effect.

"Now, boys, this is a new half<sup>5</sup>. Take care what you're about in this new half. Come fresh up to the lessons, I advise you, for I come fresh up to the punishment. I won't flinch. It will be of no use your rubbing yourselves; you won't rub the marks out that I shall give you. Now get to work, every boy!"

When this dreadful exordium<sup>6</sup> was over, and Tungay had stamped out again, Mr. Creakle came

to where I sat, and told me that if I were famous for biting<sup>7</sup>, he was famous for biting, too. He then showed me the cane, and asked me what I thought of that, for a tooth? Was it a sharp tooth, hey? Was it a double tooth, hey? Had it a deep prong, hey? Did it bite, hey? Did it bite? At every question he gave me a fleshy cut with it that made me writhe, and soon in tears.

Not that I mean to say these were special marks of distinction, which only I received. On the contrary, a large majority of the boys (especially the smaller ones) were visited with similar instances of notice<sup>8</sup>, as Mr. Creakle made the round of the schoolroom. Half the establishment was writhing and crying, before the day's work began; and how much of it had writhed and cried before the day's work was over, I am really afraid to recollect, lest I should seem to exaggerate.

I should think there never can have been a man who enjoyed his profession more than Mr. Creakle did. He had a delight in cutting at the boys, which was like the satisfaction of a craving appetite. I am confident that he couldn't resist a chubby boy, especially; that there was a fascination in such a subject, which made him restless in his mind, until he had scored and marked him for the day. I was chubby myself, and ought to know . . .

Here I sit at the desk again, watching his eye - humbly watching his eye, as he rules a cyphering-book for another victim whose hands have just been flattened by that identical ruler, and who is trying to wipe the sting out with a pocket handkerchief. I have plenty to do. I don't watch his eyes in idleness, but because I am morbidly attracted to it, and in a dread desire to know what he will do next, and whether it will be my turn to suffer or somebody else's. A lane of small boys beyond me, with the same interest in their eyes watch it too. I think he knows it, though he pretends he doesn't. He makes dreadful mouths<sup>9</sup> as he rules the cyphering-book; and now he throws his eyes, sideways down our lane, and we all droop over our books and tremble. A moment afterwards we are again eyeing him. An unhappy culprit, found guilty of imperfect exercise, approaches at his command. The culprit falters excuses, and

professes a determination to do better tomorrow. Mr. Creakle cuts<sup>10</sup> a joke before he beats him, and we laugh at it - miserable little dogs, we laugh, with our visages<sup>11</sup> as white as ashes, and our hearts sinking into our boots.

Here I sit again, on a drowsy summer afternoon. A buzz and hum go up around me, as if the boys were so many blue-bottles<sup>12</sup>. A cloggy sensation of the Juke-warm fat of meat is upon me (we dined an hour or two ago) and my head is as heavy as so much lead. I would give the world to go to sleep. I sit with my eyes on Mr. Creakle, blinking at him like a young owl; when sleep overpowers me for a minute he still looms through my slumber, ruling those cyphering-books, until he softly comes behind me and wakes me to a plainer perception of him, with a red ridge across my back.

Here I am in the playground, with my eye still fascinated by him, though I can't see him. The window at a little distance from which I know he is having his dinner, stands for him, and I eye that instead. If he shows his face near it, mine assumes an imploring and submissive expression. If he looks out through the glass, the boldest boy stops in the middle of a shout or yell, and becomes

contemplative. One day, Traddles (the most unfortunate boy in the world) breaks that window with a ball. I shudder at this moment with the tremendous sensation of seeing it done, and feeling that the ball has bounced on to Mr. Creakle's sacred head.

Poor Traddles! In a tight sky-blue suit that made his legs look like German sausages or roly-poly pudding<sup>13</sup>, he was the merriest and most miserable of the boys. He was always being caned - I think he was caned every day that half-year, except one holiday Monday when he was only ruler'd on both hands-and was always going to write to his uncle about it, and never did. After laying his head on the desk for a little while, he would cheer up, somehow, begin to laugh again, and draw skeletons all over his slate, before his eyes were dry. I used to wonder what comfort Traddles found in drawing skeletons; and for some time looked upon him as a sort of hermit, who reminded himself by those symbols of mortality that caning couldn't last for ever. But I believe he only did it because they were easy and didn't want any features.

## DISCUSSION:

1. How does Dickens manage to create such a vivid description of the classroom?
2. What single word, or short phrase would you use to describe the classroom described by Dickens?
3. Based on the selection above describe Creakle, Traddles and David Copperfield.
4. List the techniques of characterization Dickens uses.
5. What is the narrator's relationship to Creakle?
6. List examples of the narrator's irony and explain the effect it has on the tone of the passage.
7. Describe the technique Dickens uses to create a sense of immediacy.
8. What does the selection above tell us about the society and times in which it was written?

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<sup>1</sup> now also used in British English

<sup>2</sup> also used in British English

<sup>3</sup> flat stone for writing on

<sup>4</sup> Tungay acted as Creakle's mouthpiece, repeating everything he said

<sup>5</sup> six month term

<sup>6</sup> introduction (archaic)

<sup>7</sup> David's stepfather had told Creakle that David bit people

<sup>8</sup> intentions (archaic)

<sup>9</sup> expressions with the mouth

<sup>10</sup> makes

<sup>11</sup> faces (archaic)

<sup>12</sup> a type of fly

<sup>13</sup> a traditional cylindrical-shaped pudding