UNIT 9: CHARLES DICKENS: *TALE OF TWO CITIES* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE:

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Charles Dickens: The Novelist

9.3.1 His Life

9.3.2 His Works

9.4 Story of the Novel

9.5 Critical Reception of Dickens

9.6 Let us Sum up

9.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

9.8 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss Charles Dickens as an outstanding Victorian novelist
- consider Dickens as a strong commentator on the social and ethical issues of the Victorian age
- examine Dickens' revisiting history through the French Revolution as reflected in the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*
- discuss how he makes London and Paris two focal points of the plot in the novel
- appreciate *A tale of Two Cities* as a unique testament to the changes taking place in English society during his times.

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, you will get an opportunity to read about Charles Dickens and his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*—a touching human story against the backdrop of the French Revolution. Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) was an English writer and social critic of the Victorian era. Famous for his creation of some of the world's best-known

fictional characters, Dickens is considered by many to be the greatest novelist of his time. His works enjoyed unprecedented popularity during his lifetime, and by the 20th century, he has been widely recognised as a literary genius. The novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) is set in London and Paris before and during the French Revolution. The novel tells the story of the French Doctor Manette, his 18-year-long imprisonment in the Bastille in Paris, and his release to life in London with his daughter Lucie, whom he had never met. The story is set against the conditions that led up to the French Revolution, and the Reign of Terror.

9.3 CHARLES DICKENS: THE NOVELIST

9.3.1 His Life

Charles John Huffam Dickens was an outstanding English writer and social critic who is generally regarded as the greatest novelist of the Victorian period. Famous mainly for creating some of the world's most memorable fictional characters Dickens' works enjoyed unprecedented popularity and fame in his own days but it was in the twentieth century that a revaluation of his literary genius has established him as one of the greatest English novelists of all time. In the following subsections you will briefly read his life and works.



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org

Charles Dickens (1812-1870) was born in Landport, Portsmouth, on February 7, 1812, as the second of eight children to John Dickens, a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, and his wife Elizabeth Dickens. The Dickens family moved to London in 1814 and two years later to Chatham, Kent, where Charles spent the early years of his childhood. Due to financial difficulties they came back to London in 1822, settling in Camden Town, a poor

neighbourhood of London. Then in 1824, Charles's father, who had no aptitude for finance and was constantly in debt, was imprisoned in the Marshalsea debtor's prison. As a result of this, Charles, then twelve years old, was withdrawn from school and forced to work at a blacking factory that handled "blacking" or shoe polish to help support the family, while his mother and siblings joined his father at the prison. This experience left profound psychological and sociological scars on Charles. It gave him a very personal acquaintance with poverty and made him the most vigorous and influential voice of the working classes in his age. This experience also became a source both of creative energy of Dickens and of his preoccupation with the themes of alienation and betrayal in his novels.

When Dickens was around fifteen years of age, he gained employment as an office boy at an attorney's, while he studied shorthand at night. From 1830, he began working as a shorthand reporter in the courts and afterwards as a parliamentary and newspaper reporter. In 1833, Dickens began his literary career with contributions of short stories and essays to periodicals. *A Dinner at Popular Walk* was Dickens's first published story, appearing in the *Monthly Magazine* in December 1833. In 1834, while still a newspaper reporter, he adopted his famed pseudonym Boz. Dickens's first book, a collection of stories titled *Sketches by Boz*, was published in 1836. In the same year, he married the daughter of the editor of the *Evening Chronicle*, Catherine Hogarth, with whom he had ten children. They separated in 1858, but since divorce was nearly unthinkable in that age, he kept her in a separate house and supported her financially until her death. There were speculations later on that Ellen Ternan, a young actress friend, may have been Dickens's mistress, and that she may have been part of the reason for the failure of his marriage, though that relationship itself had apparently become central to his life and career.

Although Dickens was mainly a novelist, he continued his journalistic work until the end of his life, editing *The Daily News*, *Household Words*, and *All the Year Round*. His connections to various magazines and newspapers facilitated his publishing his own fiction at the beginning of his career. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* was published in monthly parts from April 1836 to November 1837. This work became very popular, continuing to be so after it was published in book form in 1837. After the success of Pickwick, Dickens embarked on a full-time career as a novelist, producing work of increasing complexity and at short intervals: *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge* as part of the *Master Humphrey's Clock* series (1840-41), all being published in monthly instalments before being made into books.

In 1842, he travelled with his wife to the United States and Canada, which led to his controversial *American Notes* (1842) and which also formed the basis for some of the episodes in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Dickens's series of five Christmas Books followed soon: *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1844), *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), *The Battle of Life* (1846), and *The Haunted Man* (1848). After travelling further to Italy (1844) and Switzerland (1846) Dickens continued his successful novelistic career with *Dombey and Son* (1848), the largely autobiographical *David Copperfield* (1849-50), *Bleak House* (1852-53), *Hard Times* (1854), *Little Dorrit* (1857), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and *Great Expectations* (1861).

In 1856 Dickens bought Gad's Hill Place, an estate he had admired since his childhood. In 1858, he began a series of readings from his books, which became instantly popular and for which he was handsomely paid. In that same year, however, after a long period of difficulties, he separated from his wife. Towards the end of his life, Dickens worsened his declining health by giving numerous readings. During one of his readings in 1869, he collapsed due to a mild stroke. He retreated to Gad's Hill and

began to work on *Edwin Drood*, which was never completed. He died at home on June 9, 1870 after suffering another, more severe, stroke. Contrary to his wish to be buried in Rochester Cathedral, he was buried in the Poets' Corner of Westminster Abbey.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What, according to you, basically accounts for Charles Dickens' popularity as a novelist?

Q 2: What kind of experiences had a profound psychological and sociological impact on the mind of Charles Dickens?

Q 3: How did Charles Dickens begin his literary career?

9.3.2 His Works

Sketches by Boz (1836) is taken to be Dickens's first work. It is a journalistic book based on the various aspects of the city of London. However, it his through his *Pickwick Papers* (published monthly from 1836-1837) that he first emerged as a novelist of the future. It is a picaresque comedy in which the interest lies not only in the absurd incidents but also in the way in which the protagonist Mr. Pickwick reacts to new kinds of emerging events. Moreover, portraying characters from various parts of England Dickens seeks to provide an impression of the 19th century English social scene before the Industrial revolution.

With literary success assured, Dickens worked with greater intensity and overlapping with *Pickwick Papers* serialised first *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), then *Nicholas Nickleby* (1938-9) and then *Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41). *Oliver Twist* is the first of Dickens' novels to deal with specific social ills like criminal gangs of London while his *Nicholas Nickleby* is based on the centrality

of human fate. *Old Curiosity Shop,* on the other hand, turns out to be an excellent example of Dickensian sentimentality. His next novel *Barnby Rudge* (1841) presents a contrastive analysis of individual eccentricities against a general atmosphere. But, it was with *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44) that Dickens first presents his real stature as a novelist. It is a novel based on the ironical study of the effects of greed on the characters of the novel. For the first time in this work, Dickens took a moral situation rather than a group of picaresque characters and incidents.

Dombey and Son (1846-48) is famous for the richness of characters and the moral purpose often derived from the author's awareness of the tensions between private affection and the demands of the industrial civilisation. The richness, flexibility and strength of his autobiographical novel *David Copperfield* (1849) draw attention of every serious reader. The portrayal of the clash of different ways of life and different strata of society in conflict with each other only helps the readers to judge how Dickens skilfully explores the relationship between convention and reality and between public and private standards. His next novel *Bleak House* (1852) is equally important in terms of the writer's concentration of the tragic ironies of human ambition and professions. Dickens's understanding of the ills of the Utilitarian industrialist philosophy is best reflected in his novel *Hard Times* (1854). The maturity of Dickens as a writer is noticeable in its juxtaposition of apparent and real knowledge, of the mechanical and the imaginative.

You will find it interesting to note that with a new set of novels like *Little Dorrit* (1855), *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860), *Our Mutual Friend* (1864) and *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). Dickens achieves almost full maturity as a novelist. *Little Dorrit* presents the paradox of fate and fortune, *A Tale of Two Cities,* offers a parallel but historical study of two cities, Paris and London during the French Revolution; *Great*

Expectations explores, more than anything else, the relation between gentility and morality, and *Our Mutual Friend* provides a convincing picture of the effects of financial and social ambitions on the characters. His *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* is a high-powered thriller but it remained unfinished due to Dickens' death in June 1870.



LET US KNOW

To Dickens goes the credit of depicting most authentically the English society of the times. The portrayal of common ordinary life against the dramatic changes brought to society by the Industrial Revolution marks much of his creative writings. If you read some of his novels it will not be difficult for you to understand that his fictional world is filled up by eccentrics, villains, unfortunates, hypocrites, social climbers, newly rich, criminals, innocents, bureaucrats, exhibitionists, self deceivers, roisters etc. exemplifying his acute understanding of his contemporary life and society. Moreover, an awareness of his own middle class origin, his unhappy childhood, and a sentimental attitude towards human problems characterise almost all his novels.

It is important to acknowledge Dickens's strength as a novelist as belonging to the English realist tradition. Other than the above-mentioned novels, his canon also includes *A Child's History of England* (1851-53), many short stories, several comic plays and other writings. He is also said to have written a series of letters that would throw light on his life history even more. To him also attributed four Christmas Books: *A Christmas Carol* (1843), *The Chimes* (1845), *The Battle of Life: A Love Story* (1846), *The Haunted Man And The Ghost's Bargain* (1848).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What are the important characteristics of Dickens as a writer?

Q 5: Which, according to you, are the mature novels of Dickens and why?

Q 6: Why do you think Dickens's novels are important social documents?

9.4 STORY OF THE NOVEL

The novel begins in the year 1775 with Lucie Manette journeying to Paris to meet her father who has recently been released from the Bastille. Helpless and now mentally unbalanced, he is taken care of by Ernest Defarge, his sometime servant. Lucie and Mr. Jarvis Lorry take him back to London after he regains his balance after meeting his daughter. Five years later in London, Lucie makes the acquaintance of Sydney Carton and Charles Darnay (a French nobleman of the Evrémonde family who has repudiated his title), both of whom fall in love with her. However, Lucie prefers Darnay and subsequently marries him. Sometime later, in France, Darnay's uncle the Marquis de St. Evrémonde is killed on the orders of the Defarges due to his atrocities against the common people. When Darnay returns to Paris, he is captured too and sentenced to death at the guillotine. Doctor Manette, Lucie (accompanied by her child), and Miss Pross reach Paris, where the Doctor attempts to persuade the revolutionaries to release Darnay. This attempt is, however, unsuccessful. The reason behind this is that the Defarges learn of Doctor Manette's imprisonment by the Evrémondes after he witnessed the rape of a peasant girl and the murder of her brother by the members of this family. In the meantime, Sydney Carton also travels to Paris with a resolve to rescue Darnay. He enlists for this purpose the aid of John Barsad who is revealed to be Miss Pross's brother, Solomon Pross. The sense of urgency is heightened by the discovery by Carton of the

Defarges's plan to kill Lucie and her child as well. It is, moreover, learnt that Madame Defarge is the sister of the murdered peasant girl and her brother. Sydney plans to evacuate the Manettes safely from Paris and is able to make an entry to Darnay's cell through Barsad's help. He drugs Darney and sends him to London with the Manettes, substituting himself for Charles. Madame Defarges dies when Miss Pross accidentally shoots her in an attempt to ward her off, while Sydney Carton is executed by the revolutionaries. The novel ends with the voice of Carton articulating his sense of satisfaction at having been able to reclaim some purpose in his life through his sacrifice.

The book gives a vivid picture (modelled on Carlyle's *The French Revolution)* of Paris at this period. Critics complained on publication of its lack of humour, but it later achieved wide popularity, partly through successful dramatizations and film adaptations.

9.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DICKENS

Dickens captured the popular imagination as no other novelist had done and, despite some murmurs against his sensationalism and sentimentality and his inability to portray women other than as innocents or grotesques, he was also held in high critical esteem, admired by contemporaries as varied as Queen Victoria and Dostoevsky. But, it was not until the 20th century, that he began to attract serious academic attention, as one can find through George Orwell's 'Charles Dickens', in *Inside the Whale* (1940), Humphrey House's *The Dickens World* (1941), and Edmund Wilson's "Dickens: The Two Scrooges" (1941). Later criticism has tended to praise the complexity of the sombre late works at the expense of the high-spirited humour and genius for caricature traditionally labelled 'Dickensian'.

A Tale of Two Cities was in a sense uncharacteristic of Dickens in that it referred to a period some seventy years earlier from the Victorian society in which he lived. Many of the contemporary critics such as Sir James Fitzjames Stephen condemned the novel as clumsy, disjointed, mechanical and formulaic, showing an appalling grotesqueness and want of sensibility. Dickens' disparagement of 18th

century England in relation to the present, and his hostile portrayal of the French aristocracy of the same period also came under attack. Even in the late 19th and early 20th century, critics, including the important Dickens scholar George Gissing and Dickens' fellow-journalist and novelist G. K. Chesterton, criticised the novel for its emotional approach to the Revolution at the cost of a more intellectual engagement with it, as well as its perceived constrained structure. At the same time, Dickens' contemporary writers such as John Forster, Thomas Carlyle, Wilkie Collins, and Mark Twain also praised the novel. So, we find that the novel was immensely popular with the reading public on its original serialisation in 1859. But, its critical reception till today is marked by somewhat mixed response from the reading public as well as the critics.



9.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have read about Charles Dickens who is considered by many to be the greatest novelist of the Victorian era. His works enjoyed unprecedented popularity during his lifetime, and by the 20th century, he has been widely recognised as a literary genius. His novel *A Tale of Two Cities* is a touching human story against the backdrop of the French Revolution. *Sketches by Boz, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby, Old Curiosity Shop, Dombey and Son, David Copperfield, Bleak House, Hard Times, Great Expectations* are some of his other important novels. You have learnt how Dickens captured the popular imagination of the time that helped him gain high critical esteem. However, it was not until the 20th century, that he began to attract serious academic attention, mostly for his portrayal of the life of the common people under the Industrial Revolution.



9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q No 1: His memorable fictional characters… …his acute understanding of the life of the poor people crushed by Industrialism.

Ans to Q No 2: At an early age of 12, Dickens was withdrawn from school and forced to work at a factory that handled shoe polish to help support the family… …this experience helped him to gain understanding of the poverty of the working class people.

Ans to Q No 3: Dickens began his literary career in 1833 by contributing stories and essays to periodicals like the *Monthly Magazine*… …while still a newspaper reporter he published in 1836 *Sketches by Boz* a short story collection… …it is through his *Pickwick Papers* (published monthly from 1836-1837) that he first emerged as a novelist of the future.

Ans to Q No 4: Integration of journalistic writings with stories about the English middle class life… …depiction of the urban life and its human character… …discussion of how dramatic changes were brought to society by the Industrial Revolution… …acute awareness of his own middle class origin and his unhappy childhood… …a sentimental attitude towards common human problems etc.

Ans to Q No 5: *Little Dorrit*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Great Expectations*, *Our Mutual Friend The Mystery of Edwin Drood… … Little Dorrit* presents the paradoxes of fate and fortune… … *A Tale of Two Cities* provides a parallel study of Paris and London during the French Revolution… …*Great Expectations* explores the relation between gentility and morality… … *Our Mutual Friend* deals with the effects of financial and social ambitions on the characters.

Ans to Q No 6: It is mainly because of the way his novels deal with specific social issues… …for example, *Oliver Twist* deals with criminal gangs of London… …*Martin Chuzzlewit* presents the effects of greed on the characters of the novel… …*Dombey and Son* represents the tensions between private affection and the demands of the industrial civilisation… …*David Copperfield* portrays the clash of different ways of life… …*Bleak House* (1852) concentrates on the tragic ironies of human ambition and professions etc.



9.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q1: What are the important characteristics of Charles Dickens as a writer? Discuss with reference to some of his greatest novels.

Q 2: Write a note on the critical reception of Charles Dickens as a Victorian novelist.

Q 3: **"**The portrayal of common ordinary life against the dramatic changes brought to society by the Industrial Revolution marks much of his creative writings." Elaborate this statement.

Q 4: What makes the portrayal of two important cities like London and Paris as the backdrop of the novel so significant, on the part of Charles Dickens? Give a detailed answer.

Q 5: Write the story of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* in your own words.

* * *