

Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Novelist, journalist, court reporter, editor, amateur actor. Editor of London Daily News, 1846; founder and editor of Household Words, 1833-35, and of All the Year Round, 1859-70; presented public readings of his works, beginning 1858.

He was only fifty-eight when he died. His horse had been shot, as he had wanted; his body lay in a casket in his home at Gad's Hill, festooned with scarlet geraniums. Tributes poured in from all over his native England and from around the world. Statesmen, commoners, and fellow writers all grieved his passing. As quoted in Peter Ackroyd's monumental study, Dickens, the news of Charles Dickens death on June 9, 1870, reverberated across the Atlantic, eliciting the poet Longfellow to say that he had never known "an author's death to cause such general mourning." England's Thomas Carlyle wrote: "It is an event world-wide, a unique of talents suddenly extinct." And the day after his death, the newspaper Dickens once edited, the London Daily News, reported that Dickens had been "emphatically the novelist of his age. In his pictures of contemporary life posterity will read, more clearly than in contemporary

records, the character of nineteenth century life."

It was a judgment that has been proven more than perceptive. Not only was Dickens a popular recorder of the life of his times, but he was also an incredibly successful man of letters. One of the more interesting aspects of Dickens life, in fact, was the degree of popularity which he experienced during his lifetime. There was no *la vie boheme* for Dickens, no artistic squalor or neglect of his works. From the age of twenty-four, with publication of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, Dickens was an amazing literary success on both sides of the Atlantic. By the age of thirty he had five immensely popular and immense novels under his belt, including such perennial favourites as *Oliver Twist* and *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby*.

His early period of creativity was marked by a proclivity to humour and the picaresque, and early on his readership marvelled at his assortment of characters. If a Dickens plot was not always of clockwork fastidiousness, the author more than made up for it with a host of leading and secondary characters that would make a Hollywood casting director envious. It has been reckoned that Dickens created over 2,000 such characters during his relatively short creative life. He wrote fourteen full novels--most over 800 pages in their modern editions--as well as sketches, travel, and Christmas books, and was at work on his

fifteenth novel when he died. Dickens grew throughout his career; he was not content to reproduce formulaic successes. He took chances; he dealt with social issues; he was not shy of working with ideas. A popular novelist, he was never so in love with his reputation as to stand still.

His late period was marked by brooding and dark novels that illuminated a part of England most would have been happy to have left in the dark. The sombre tone of *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* reflected the harsh social reality of an England besotted with industrial progress at any price. Ironically, many of the societal ills which Dickens wrote about in such novels had already been righted by the time of publication. The 1850s and 1860s in England were decades of hope and prosperity, but Dickens could never forget another age, a time during which he himself was growing up. Throughout his work there is a constant returning to themes of his own childhood: of debtor's prisons--such as the one to which his own father was once sent--and the internal dealings of family. Dickens was a writer of the city and of the country, and both strains were part of his own make-up as well. His depictions of Victorian London have, as was prophesied by the *Daily News*, become historical records of a world now forever lost.

The fame of this enormously inventive author has not diminished over time. He, and his fellow countryman, William Shakespeare, are the most

written about authors in the English language. His novels not only bridge cultures, equally popular in many of the world's languages, but they also span generations, appealing to adult and young readers alike. Books such as *Oliver Twist*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Personal History of David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, and *Great Expectations* have long been part of the canon of literature in high schools, and deservedly so for, as in the case of *A Tale of Two Cities*, their action, and in several others, their depictions of youthful characters facing life with both determination and a sense of humour.

By, Arshad Khan
Dept. of English
J N College Madhubani