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Charles Dickens: Life, Work and Legacy

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Social Commentary



As a socially responsible writer, and as a journalist, Dickens was inevitably drawn to examine specific social issues in his fiction journalism. In his early years, for example, in *Sunday Under Three Heads* (1836) he was outspoken in his criticism of Sabbatarianism, which sought to deny people recreation on Sundays. In subsequent years he spoke out against such issues as poverty and child neglect, interminable legal processes, and capital punishment, and agitated for prison reform, better public sanitation, workers' rights, and universal childhood education.

Dickens's most effective and memorable mechanism for advocating change or reform was through his fiction. He used satire and exaggeration, and created grotesque characters who personified the issues under consideration. For example, in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) Mr Bumble, Mrs Corney, and the Board of Guardians are employed to satirise the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834), which centralised welfare and built workhouses to accommodate the poor. In *Hard Times* (1854) Mr Gradgrind and Mr M'Choakumchild personify the dangers of an excessively programmatic method of education known as the 'Object Lesson'. In *Little Dorrit* (1855-7) the Circumlocution Office is Dickens's satire of the endlessly circular workings of government and the civil service.

There are very few instances in which Dickens's writings led to direct social change or action. One striking example is his critique of the 'Yorkshire Schools' in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9). These infamous institutions charged cheap fees, and served as dumping grounds for illegitimate and unwanted children. In preparing to write the novel Dickens visited the area, and interviewed one of the most notorious headmasters. Dickens embodied these details in the fictional school run by the cruel and malicious Wackford Squeers. Soon after *Nickleby* appeared, the schools were closed.

