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Charles Dickens: Life, Work and Legacy

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Dickens and Scandal



Mary Hogarth (by F. G. Kitton)



Catherine Dickens (by Daniel Maclise)



Ellen Lawless Ternan

Dickens married Catherine Hogarth (1815-79) in 1836, and the couple had ten children together; they were happy at first, and early letters between them are playful and tender. Catherine's younger sister Mary (1820-37) lived with the couple after their marriage; Dickens was extremely fond of his sister-in-law, and was shattered when she died suddenly of an undiagnosed heart complaint. He wrote soon afterwards, 'Thank God she died in my arms, and the very last words she whispered were of me'.

Catherine found the experience of childbirth difficult: she suffered several miscarriages, and appears to have suffered from a post-natal complaint. In 1851, after the birth of her ninth child (Dora, who died aged eight months) she suffered a nervous illness. Dickens began to feel unsettled and dissatisfied; his volatility grew, and the marriage was placed under great strain. In 1857 he intimated to his friend John Forster 'Poor Catherine and I are not made for each other'.

That same year Dickens developed a strong attraction to a young actress, Ellen Ternan (1839-1914), with whom he had performed in a play. The final rupture with Catherine was brought about through some gossip about jewellery which Dickens had given to Ellen. Meanwhile, Catherine's mother had spread rumours about Dickens's relationship with Ellen; this outraged Dickens, who forced the Hogarth family to sign a retraction. The separation was effected, with Catherine receiving an annuity of £600 a year. Dickens made a public declaration of his changed circumstances in 1858, and never saw her again.

Dickens's relationship with 'Nelly' has been the subject of much speculation, since he took great care to keep her out of the public eye. The couple spent time in France (where Dickens rented a house for her), and in properties in Berkshire (for which Dickens, using an alias, paid the rates). He left her £1000 in his will. In 1876 Ellen married a clergyman, and lived in Margate. Details of her relationship with Dickens did not become public knowledge until the 1930s.

