Dickens 3 Essay, Research Paper

Charles Dickens was an 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, both real and imagined. (Encarta, 1998)

Charles Dickens was born on Friday, February 7, 1812 at No. 1 Mile End Terrace, Landport, Portsmouth. His father, John Dickens, was a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. In 1814 John was transferred to Somerset House in London. In 1817 John moved his family to Chatham and worked in the naval dockyard.

It was here, at Chatham in the Medway Valley, that Charles experienced his happiest childhood memories. John was transferred back to the London office and moved his family to Camden Town in 1822.

John Dickens, continually living beyond his means, was finally imprisoned for debt at the Marshalsea debtor’s prison in Southwark in 1824. 12 year old Charles was removed from school and sent to work at a boot-blacking factory earning six shillings a week to help support the family. Charles considered this period as the most terrible time in his life and would later write that he wondered ‘how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age’.

This childhood poverty and adversity contributed greatly to Dickens’ later views on social reform in a country in the throes of the Industrial Revolution and his compassion for the lower class, especially the children.

Dickens would go on to write 15 major novels and countless short storys and articles before his death in 1870. The inscription on his tombstone in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey reads: He was a sympathiser to the poor, the suffering, and the oppressed; and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world.

The storys, characters, and places he wrote about will live forever.

Dickens 1842

On January 3, 1842 Charles Dickens sailed from Liverpool on the steamship Britannia bound for America. Dickens was at the height of his popularity on both sides of the Atlantic and, securing a year off from writing, determined to visit the young nation to see for himself this haven for the oppressed which had righted all the wrongs of the Old World. The voyage out, accompanied by his wife, Kate, and her maid, Anne Brown, proved to be one of the stormiest in years and his cabin aboard the Britannia proved to be so small that Dickens quipped that their portmanteaux could “no more be got in at the door, not to say stowed away, than a giraffe could be forced into a flowerpot”.

The violent seas on the journey can best be described by Dickens’ comical account of trying to administer a little brandy to his wife and her traveling companions to calm their fears.

Arriving in Boston on January 22, 1842 Dickens was at once mobbed and generally given the adulation afforded modern day movie stars. Dickens at first reveled in the attention but soon the never-ending demand of his time began to wear on his enthusiasm.

One of the things on Dickens’ agenda for the trip to America was to try to put forth the idea of international copyright. Dickens’ works were routinely pirated in America and for the most part he received not a penny for his writing there. Dickens argued that American authors would benefit also as they were pirated in Europe but these arguments generally fell on deaf ears. Indeed there would be no international copyright law for another 50 years.

In keeping with his fascination for the unusual, visits to prisons, hospitals for the insane, reform schools, and schools for blind, deaf, and dumb children were high on his list of places to visit in almost every city he toured. He also toured factories, the industrial mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, a Shaker village in New York, and a prairie in Illinois. While in Washington he attended sessions of Congress, toured the White House, and met President Tyler. In the White House, as just about everywhere he went in America, Dickens was appalled at the American male passion for chewing tobacco.

Dickens wanted to see the South and observe slavery first hand. His initial plan was to go to Charleston but because of the heat and the length of the trip he settled for Richmond, Virginia. He was revolted by what he saw in Richmond, both by the condition of the slaves themselves and by the whites attitudes towards slavery. In American Notes, the book written after he returned to England describing his American visit, he wrote scathingly about the institution of slavery, citing newspaper accounts of runaway slaves horribly disfigured by their cruel masters.

From Richmond Dickens returned to Washington and started a trek westward to St. Louis. Traveling by riverboat and stagecoach the Dickens entourage, which included Dickens, his wife Kate, Kate’s maid, Anne Brown, and George Putnam, Charles’ traveling secretary, endured quite an adventure. Gaining anonymity and more personal freedom the further west they went, Dickens’ power of observation provides a very entertaining and enlightening view of early America.

Dickens came away from his American experience with a sense of disappointment. On returning to England Dickens began an account of his American trip which he completed in four months. Not only did Dickens attack slavery in American Notes, he also attacked the American press whom he blamed for the American’s lack of general information. In Dickens’ next novel, Martin Chuzzlewit, he sends young Martin to America where he continues to vent his feelings for the young republic. American response to both books was extremely negative but eventually the passion subsided and Dickens’ popularity was restored.

1812 – Feb 7 Dickens born in Landport, Portsmouth

1812 – Jun 24 John Dickens moves family to Hawke Street, Kingston, Portsea

1814 – John Dickens transferred to Somerset House, London

1815 – Catherine Hogarth, Dickens’ future wife, born

1817 – John Dickens moves family to Chatham

1821 – Dickens starts school at William Giles School, Chatham

1822 – John Dickens transferred to London, moves family to 16 Bayham Street, Camden Town

1824 – Feb John Dickens imprisoned at Marshalsea for debt

1824 – Feb Dickens leaves school, employed at Warren’s Blacking House

1824 – Mar John Dickens released from debtors prison

1824 – Jun Dickens leaves blacking factory, returned to school

1825 – John Dickens retires with small pension

1827 – John Dickens evicted from home, Dickens removed from school

1827 – Dickens begins work as solicitor’s clerk, Ellis and Blackmore, Gray’s Inn

1828 – Dickens working as a reporter for the Morning Herald

1829 – Dickens becomes a freelance reporter at Doctor’s Common

1831 – Dickens reporting for the Mirror of Parliament

1832 – Dickens reporting for the True Sun

1833 – Dickens’ first story, A Dinner at Poplar Walk, published in Monthly Magazine

1834 – Dickens meets Catherine Hogarth, 8 more stories published in Monthly Magazine

1836 – Dickens marries Catherine Hogarth, begins writing Pickwick

1837 – Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club published

1838 – Oliver Twist published

1839 – Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby published

1841 – The Old Curiosity Shop published

1841 – Barnaby Rudge published

1842 – Dickens first visit to America

1843 – A Christmas Carol published

1844 – Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit published

1845 – Dickens writes Cricket on the Hearth

1848 – Dombey and Son published

1850 – David Copperfield published

1853 – Bleak House published

1854 – Hard Times published

1857 – Little Dorrit published

1858 – Dickens and Catherine are legally separated

1859 – A Tale of Two Cities published

1861 – Great Expectations published

1865 – Our Mutual Friend published

1867 – Dickens second American visit

1869 – Dickens begins writing Edwin Drood (never completed)

1870 – Dickens dies, buried in Poet’s Corner, Westminster Abbey