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BLEAK HOUSE

by **CHARLES DICKENS**



Dennis Butts

MACMILLAN MASTER GUIDES

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BY CHARLES DICKENS

DENNIS BUTTS

M
MACMILLAN

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The aim of the Macmillan Master Guides is to help you to appreciate the book you are studying by providing information about it and by suggesting ways of reading and thinking about it which will lead to a fuller understanding. The section on the writer's life and background has been designed to illustrate those aspects of the writer's life which have influenced the work, and to place it in its personal and literary context. The summaries and critical commentary are of special importance in that each brief summary of the action is followed by an examination of the significant critical points. The space which might have been given to repetitive explanatory notes has been devoted to a detailed analysis of the kind of passage which might confront you in an examination. Literary criticism is concerned with both the broader aspects of the work being studied and with its detail. The ideas which meet us in reading a great work of literature, and their relevance to us today, are an essential part of our study, and our Guides look at the thought of their subject in some detail. But just as essential is the craft with which the writer has constructed his work of art, and this may be considered under several technical headings – characterisation, language, style and stagecraft, for example.

The authors of these Guides are all teachers and writers of wide experience, and they have chosen to write about books they admire and know well in the belief that they can communicate their admiration to you. But you yourself must read and know intimately the book you are studying. No one can do that for you. You should see this book as a lamp-post. Use it to shed light, not to lean against. If you know your text and know what it is saying about life, and how it says it, then you will enjoy it, and there is no better way of passing an examination in literature.

JAMES GIBSON

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1 CHARLES DICKENS:

LIFE AND BACKGROUND

Charles Dickens was born on 7 February 1812 in Landport, a district of Portsmouth, where his father, John Dickens, worked as a clerk in the Navy Pay Office. In 1817 the family moved to Chatham, in Kent where Charles enjoyed a happy childhood around Rochester and in the surrounding riverside and country of the marshes.

Mr Dickens moved to work in London in 1822, but he was not very prudent financially and his fortunes declined so much that he was sent to prison for debt. What followed shattered young Charles. He was taken away from school and sent to work in Warren's Blacking Warehouse at Hungerford Stairs in London, and though the distressing experience only lasted a few months it left an indelible impression of shame and bitterness on the young boy's mind. The memory of feeling totally abandoned in the world was so powerful that Dickens could rarely bring himself to speak of it, even in later years when he was rich and famous.

A few months later Mr Dickens was discharged from prison and obtained work again, so he was able to rescue Charles from the Warehouse and send him back to school. As a boy Charles always read widely, particularly translations of *Don Quixote* and of *The Arabian Nights*, and such eighteenth-century novels as *Tom Jones* and *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and he also developed a lifelong interest in drama.

After leaving school at the age of fifteen in 1827 Dickens began work for Ellis and Blackmore, attorneys with offices in Gray's Inn, and he was soon occupied with getting wills registered and carrying legal documents to and from various lawyers. Because the pay was poor, Dickens soon moved to a post with Charles Molloy, a solicitor with offices in Symond's Inn, but finding this work dull he began to teach himself shorthand, and moved on again to become a law reporter in Doctors' Commons. All these experiences undoubtedly gave the young Dickens deep insights into the workings of the English legal system and the ways of lawyers and their clients which he was to think about and to use later.

After being a reporter of legal proceedings, Dickens became a newspaper reporter, often specialising in parliamentary reports, and he gradually built up a considerable reputation for the speed and excellence of his work. His attendance at parliamentary debates and political meetings sharpened his awareness of the social problems of the day: the poverty, the social unrest and all the difficulties occasioned by the Industrial Revolution which later led historians of this period to call it the Bleak Age. Dickens also began to doubt whether Parliament could ever deal with these problems in any satisfactory way.

At the same time as working as a reporter, Dickens also began writing short stories and sketches, mainly about the people and places of London, for various magazines and newspapers, and in 1836 a collection of these short pieces was published under a pseudonym as *Sketches by 'Boz'*. (Dickens had a younger brother nicknamed Moses and this became corrupted to 'Boses' and then 'Boz', the name Dickens eventually borrowed.)

One of the leading publishers of the day, Chapman and Hall, was so impressed by *Sketches by 'Boz'* that they commissioned its young author to write the letterpress to accompany a series of comic pictures dealing with a club of sporting characters which were to be drawn by a well-known artist, Robert Seymour. They were to appear in monthly instalments costing a shilling each, and the publishers thought they might sell as many as 400 copies a month. Under Dickens's dominant genius, however, the writing became more important than the illustrations, and when Seymour, who had been suffering from depression, committed suicide, he was replaced by a young illustrator Hablot K. Browne, who used the pseudonym 'Phiz' to harmonise with Dickens's 'Boz'. Thus came about the successful partnership that made *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* famous. The depiction of such comic characters as Mr Pickwick and his faithful servant Sam Weller, and such glorious scenes as Mr Pickwick's prosecution by the shady lawyers, Dodson and Fogg, helped raise the sales of the novel to about 40 000 a month, and set Dickens off on the start of a long career as England's most popular novelist.

Though *The Pickwick Papers* is mainly a comic novel, there are sombre episodes within it including several scenes set in prison. Dickens's next novel *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) concentrated more upon the harsher aspects of life with its powerful indictment of poverty and the treatment of the underprivileged in the early nineteenth century. *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-9) exhibits both satire in its depiction of the ignorant schoolmaster Mr Squeers and compassion in its portrait of Smike, the abandoned schoolboy. *The Old Curiosity Shop* of 1840-1 was one of Dickens's greatest successes, and it seemed as if the whole country held its breath as it waited to see what would happen to the young heroine, in much the same way as followers of television serials today become involved in the