

Literary Lives: Charles Dickens Comprehension Questions - Answers

1. What is Charles Dickens famous for?

He wrote over a dozen novels as well as many short stories, essays and sketches. He also toured extensively and was considered an international celebrity.

2. What happened to Dickens when he was 12?

He was sent to work at a boot blacking factory as his family were going through a financial crisis.

3. What was Dickens' first job after leaving school?

He was the junior clerk for a firm of lawyers.

4. How many instalments were there of 'The Pickwick Papers'?

Nineteen.

5. What was Dickens' 'comeback' novella, published in 1843? What is it about?

'A Christmas Carol'. The novella is about a miserly old man who encounters four ghosts on Christmas Eve.

6. How did Dickens meet Ellen Ternan?

She was an actress in a play he was producing with Wilkie Collins.

7. Name two organisations Dickens help to raise money for.

Great Ormond Street Hospital and Urania Cottage, a home for fallen women.

8. What is Mesmerism?

A technique, invented by Franz Mesmer, where a patient is put into a trance and then 'healed' by a Mesmerist who passes them invisible waves of their own energy or 'animal magnetism'.

9. What happened to Dickens in 1865?

He was travelling in a train with Ellen Ternan and her mother. They were going through Staplehurst in Kent when the train derailed. Dickens tried to help the wounded until rescuers came. Ten people were killed and forty were wounded.

10. What is unusual about 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood'?

It is unfinished – Dickens died before he could complete it.

Extension:

What evidence is there that Dickens was a very successful author? Find examples from throughout the text.

Answers could include:

- He is still admired and celebrated today, nearly 150 years after his death.
- He wrote more than a dozen novels, as well as short stories, essays and sketches.
- His serialised novels were very popular: 'Oliver Twist' was even enjoyed by Queen Victoria.
- He toured America and Europe giving readings of his work, and was regarded as a celebrity during his lifetime.
- He was buried in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey – a burial place of the most successful and celebrated writers.

How did Dickens' experiences as a child impact on his later life? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer.

Answers should refer to the fact that Dickens' father was imprisoned for his debts and Dickens was forced to quit his education, aged just 12, and work long hours in a boot blacking factory to help his family. This experience was very traumatic for him and many of his works deal with poverty and social injustice, implying that he drew on these experiences when writing. Dickens became a great philanthropist, raising money for Great Ormond Street Hospital and a home for fallen women; arguably his experiences as a child influenced him to help the more disadvantaged members of society.

What are your impressions of Dickens? Do you think he was a good man? Use evidence from the text to explain your answer.

Answers should give personal opinion, backed up by evidence in the text. They may include references to Dickens' philanthropy, his relationship with his wife and mistress and his beliefs in Mesmerism.