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# research day

## Charles Dickens and Modernity by Anthony Barker

Centro de Línguas e Culturas



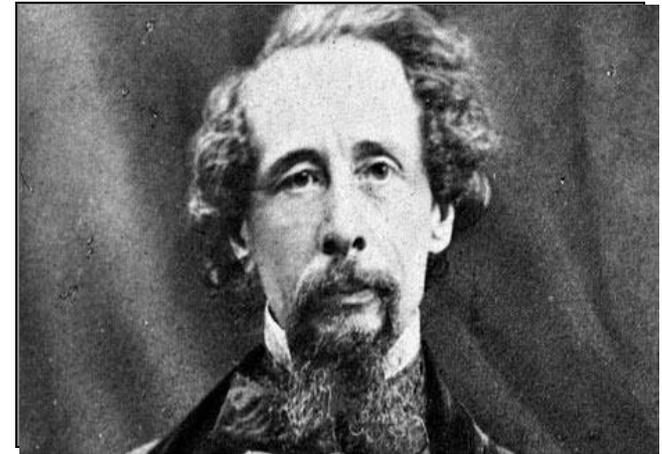
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**2012 is the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Dickens, the most important writer in English since Shakespeare.**

**His claim to importance is that he was the first artist to assume that it was a writer's obligation to address the great public social issues of the day. His work responds, as no one else's had, to the pressures of urbanization and industrialization.**

**Starting as a writer of panoramic comedies, his work darkened and began to parallel the social critiques of Marx and Engels in respect of the evils of unregulated capitalism and the arrogance of power.**



Dickens's writing career (1830 – 70) exactly spans the mid-century in Britain, the most industrialized and dynamic country of the day.

A workaholic, as prodigious for his charitable works, journalism and political interventionism, as for his fiction.

16 major novels, 14 of which were "aggressively" contemporary.



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### Key Issues in Dickens's Work

The barrenness of unreformed education and the cruelty of private schools in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838)

The treatment of the poor, especially children, in the workhouse in *Oliver Twist* (1838) and the limitations of philanthropy in *A Christmas Carol* (1843)

Human relations subordinated to money in *Dombey and Son* (1848)

The inoperancy of the civil justice system in *Bleak House* (1853)

Factory work, organised labour, strikes, riots and urban misery in *Hard Times* (1854)

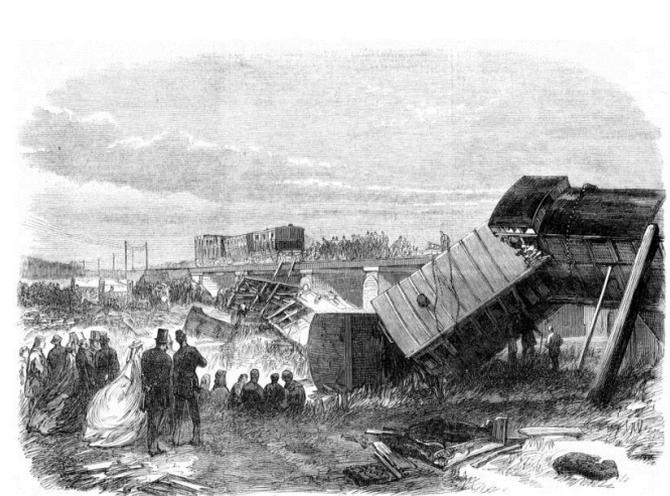
The abuses of office, bureaucracy and “Red Tape” in the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* (1857) - the indifference of Government.

The viciousness of the criminal justice system in *Great Expectations* (1861) – the colonies and ‘transportation’ to Australia

Rubbish, sewage, human waste and the ecology of London in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865)



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In the steam train, Dickens saw the modern “dragon”. He was in 1865 involved in a serious train crash at Stapleford, in which 10 died and 50 were maimed. Dickens clambered in the wreckage to pull injured people out.

In the textile power loom, he saw the new hegemony of “manufactures” and the relative irrelevance of land became evident. He also bore witness to the emergence of London as the centre of world finance and insurance.

He was the first performing actor/novelists, delivering animated reading of his work to assemblies of up to 3,000 people, including international tours.

His use of serial publication enabled him to receive feedback from his readers and so respond more acutely to public taste.