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UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

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INTRODUCTION TO DICKENS LONDON

The nineteenth century was a time of unprecedented change, and nowhere was this more evident than in London. In only a few decades, England's capital grew from a compact Regency town into a sprawling metropolis of 6.5 million inhabitants becoming one of the largest cities in the world and the heart of industrial development, international finance and trade.

London was a city of startling contrasts. New building and affluent development went hand in hand with overcrowded slums where people lived in the worst conditions imaginable. This growth far exceeded London's ability to look after the basic needs of its citizens. Charles Dickens, the century's most-loved English novelist and social critic, was London's greatest observer, obsessively walking its streets, recording its pleasures, curiosities and cruelties.

To understand Charles Dickens the man it is necessary to understand the world in which he lived. In essence, to walk in his shoes and see through his eyes the London where, as a young boy, he worked in terrible conditions in a blacking factory, learnt shorthand within months so he could become a Parliament reporter and journalist and where he wrote some of his most famous works. Dickens loved London but hated the poverty which surrounded him, mistrusted the government and was wary of the industrial changes taking place in and outside the city.

It was often said that a traveller could smell London long before reaching its outskirts. A combination of coal-fired stoves and poor sanitation made the air heavy and foul-smelling. Huge amounts of raw sewage and rubbish were dumped daily into the Thames River. Even the royals were not immune from the stench of London as Queen Victoria's apartments at Buckingham Palace were ventilated through the common sewers, which is why she spent as little time there as possible there.

In the mid-nineteenth century, London was suffering from reoccurring epidemics of cholera. In 1853 -1854 more than 10,000 Londoners were killed by cholera alone. It was thought at the time that the foul air was to blame. The hot summer of 1858, dubbed the 'Great Stink of London', overwhelmed all those who went near the Thames River - including the occupants of Buckingham Palace and the Houses of Parliament. This, together with the mounting deaths from cholera, gave impetus to legislation enabling the metropolitan board to begin work on sewer and street improvements. By 1866 most of London was connected to a sewer network devised by Engineer Joseph Bazalgette. Bazalgette was responsible for the building of over 2100 km of tunnels and pipes to divert sewage outside the city. The new sewerage system greatly reduced the death rate with outbreaks of cholera dropping dramatically.

The nineteenth century was also known as the golden age of steam. The first railway in London was built from London Bridge to Greenwich in 1836, and a great railway boom followed. Major stations were quickly built at Euston (1837), Paddington (1838), Fenchurch Street (1841), Waterloo (1848), and King's Cross (1850) with further expansion shifting into the countryside.

But the expansion of transport was not limited to dry land. As the hub of the British Empire, the Thames was clogged with ships from all over the world, and London had more shipyards than any other major city. Shipping in the Port of London supported a vast army of transport and warehouse workers, who characteristically attended the "call-on" each morning at the entrances to the docks to be assigned work for the day. This type of work was low-paid, unstable and dependent on the vagaries of world trade.

With the advent of the industrial revolution and advancement of technology, steady employment in factories, for both men and women, helped to increase work opportunities for a new generation of unskilled workers. The Industrial Revolution made a major impact on British society, with the rise of factories, urbanization, humanitarian problems, and improvements in transportation. It also created a new and wealthy upper middle class, the new rich whose entrepreneurial skills enabled them to take advantage of all the scientific and industrial changes taking place in England at this time.

As the Industrial Revolution gathered pace, London's importance as a financial centre increased substantially. An insatiable demand for capital investment in railroads, shipping, industry and agriculture fueled the growth of financial services in the City. At the centre of this nexus of private capital and commerce lay the Bank of England which, by the end of the century, contained £20 million worth of gold reserves tied to the British Pound Sterling.

One of the most impressive and memorable events of this period was the Great Exhibition of 1851 which came about through the enormous efforts of Prince Albert, Queen Victoria's husband. The Exhibition was the first great world's fair, a showcase of technology and manufacturing from countries around the globe. The Exhibition was held in Hyde Park, and the centerpiece was Joseph Paxton's revolutionary iron and glass hall, dubbed the 'Crystal Palace'.

The exhibition was an immense success, with over 200,000 attendees. After the event, the Crystal Palace was moved to Sydenham, in South London, where it stayed until it burnt down in 1936. The proceeds from the Great Exhibition went towards the founding of two new permanent displays: the Science Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Industrial, scientific and medical development during the 1800s was fast moving, sometimes controversial and for many quite overwhelming. It was world in which Dickens thrived, both artistically and financially. From his many nightly walks and early observations Dickens built up a store of knowledge that would nourish his art for the rest of his life. It is no wonder he became known as the voice of the poor for he depicted lower class 1800 society as it truly was.

But there was another side to Dickens, a private side that he very much kept hidden from his public. The child victim, the ambitious young man, the reporter, demonic worker, tireless walker, protector of orphans and helper of the needy was also a man with dark secrets.

Jackie Fritzlaff – Tutor, Through the Looking Glass: Truth Inside the Fiction