

# How to Read Charles Dickens

By Clay S. Jenkinson

1. **Take your time.** Some people like Dickens. Some people just don't. Some people love Dickens. I am one of them. You cannot rush your way through a Dickens novel, because if you try to do so you will miss what is best in Dickens, his use of the English language.
2. **It's not about the plot.** Dr. Johnson said that if you read Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* for the plot you would hang yourself. Ditto Dickens. The plotlines are often improbable, sentimental, mawkish. We know early on that Oliver Twist is going to survive, that he is going to turn out to be the illegitimate child of noble or misunderstood parents, and that after all of his suffering he is going to thrive in the world. That's not how life works, but it is how Dickens works. It's not about the plot. In fact, I recommend that you read a brief summary of the plot, even in Wikipedia, before you start so that you are not confused by the sometimes rambling prose. (Unless that kind of spoiler alert ruins the fun for you).
3. Even though he addresses social injustice, failed institutions, poverty, and the dark implications of the industrialization of Britain, **Dickens is an essentially comic genius.** Even his darkest books are filled with comic characters. His books are life-affirming. Yes, we are meant to want to demand the reform of the British court system and the poor laws. But mostly we just enjoy the parade of rich comic characters that pass through the pages of his novels.
4. Watch for a certain type of comic character. Dickens saw one of the characteristic foibles of humankind in our ability to ride the same hobby horse over and over, to have the same responses to life, **to be somehow slaves to mechanical Pavlovian responses to everything that occurs.** You will find that his characters are trapped in habits. The repetition of these habits (Jaggers washing his hands with fine soap after every legal consultation, Mr. Grimwig stomping his cane and saying he will eat his head, Pumblechook taking Pip's hand and saying, "May I...?") are some of the most joyful and exquisite moments in Dickens.
5. **Dickens had a particular genius for the dark underside of London life:** the alleyways, the rag shops, the pubs, the areas around the law courts, the docksides. He is at his best when he is describing a gritty, lawless, impoverished London. Watch for these moments, and just drink in his greatness as a writer.
6. **Dickens could not write about sex.** And yet sex is a central obsession of humankind. So you have to "translate" his bland Victorian hints into what he surely would have written had he been alive today. In *Oliver Twist*, Nancy is a prostitute. We don't necessarily know that from reading the novel, but it is so. Sex is not the most important theme in Dickens, but it's there. I recently read an essay suggesting that Fagin (the elderly Jewish gang leader in *Oliver Twist*) is a pederast. I hope that is not true. I will reread the novel with that lens. But I have my doubts.
7. **Dickens knew his Shakespeare.** He often works some allusions into his books. In *Great Expectations* there is a prolonged satire about a bad performance of *Hamlet*. Some critics have noticed that at his finest Dickens slips into his own use of a kind of prose iambic pentameter, the meter used in most English poetry.
8. It is worth remembering that **Dickens wrote for serial publication.** In other words, he had the public reading his books AS they were being written, so the reading public in some ways shaped his novels by their responses. The most famous case is the death of Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Readers begged him not to kill Nell. He killed Nell. It was such a potent moment in the history of English literature that it makes the "Who shot JR?" cliffhanger in the TV soap opera drama *Dallas* look like a minor phenomenon.
9. Finally, if you are not enjoying yourself reading Dickens, Dickens is just not for you. But hey, no refunds!!

## How to Read Dickens (part two):

Great literature is great because it is complex. Story matters. Great characters matter. But the only books that survive are ones that invite (even require) repeated encounters. Once you have read a John Grisham novel there is little to be gained by a second reading. But the twentieth reading of *Moby Dick* turns out to be as engaging and provoking as the fifth or third.

I tell my students. There is no right reading of a great piece of literature: a poem by John Donne, a short story by Hemingway. But there are demonstrably wrong readings. If you think *Hamlet* is about selling encyclopedias door to door, even metaphorically, you are wrong. But if you think *Hamlet* is about late Elizabethan anxiety about the succession, you are probably in part right. But so you are right if you think *Hamlet* is about a young man coming to terms with his mother's ongoing sexuality. There are many right answers, though not to the question of whether *Hamlet* was written in the 17<sup>th</sup> or the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Students occasionally say

to me, “If there is no right answer, what’s wrong with my view that King Lear was a promotional scheme for English nursing homes of the late Elizabethan era?” And I say: there is no one right answer, but there are demonstrably wrong ones. I’m sorry to say your Medicare-*Hamlet* theory is wrong.

We read great literature because it delivers as no other books do. You have to train and make a run at it. You don’t just sit down and read *Ulysses* over the weekend. But if you give yourself to it, you will find yourself exploring some relatively unvisited parts of your being, and you will find some things so beautiful or so pointed at you that you literally have to get up out of your chair.

Dickens is not hard the way Henry James is hard or Joyce is hard. You just have to have the patience to open yourself up to beauty—sometimes in comic/grotesque forms—to wish you had started reading Dickens years or decades ago. This will be one of the most joyous adventures of your life.

### **How to Read Dickens (part three):**

A novelist like Dickens is telling a story. A boy who befriends a suffering convict winds up becoming the benefactor of that convict without knowing it. He makes the wrong assumptions about the source of his new wealth and status. In the end he loses wealth and status but emerges as a better human being.

That’s the story of *Great Expectations* in a nutshell. In writing that paragraph I had to pause to think about how to describe the basic plot in a few sentences. It was hard work. I am not very satisfied with my summary, and I know, too, that the summary is not really what *Great Expectations* is about.

In reading we need always to attempt to figure out what the author is getting at, what s/he is trying to explore, what the story is about in a way that transcends the plot. Dickens wrote *Bleak House* for many reasons. One of them was to provide a satire about the ways in which the English legal system could be twisted about forever without reaching any useful conclusions. If you are teaching a course called Dickens and the Law, the book you automatically put on the reading list is *Bleak House*. If you are wanting to teach a course on the cost of industrialization in Britain you read *Hard Times*.

But today we don’t read Dickens to enjoy his passionate critique of the British economic, political, social, and legal system. We read Dickens because his prose is fascinating—strange, comic, a little edgy, a series of caricatures. He is the Garrison Keillor of his times. His serious critique is leavened by really remarkable comedy. Take Mr. Micawber away from *David Copperfield* and you leave a very impoverished novel. The artful dodger plays a small role in *Oliver Twist*, but without him the novel is less delightful. Miss Havisham is so powerful a character in *Great Expectations* that she seems to belong to a core British myth more than the fertile imagination of Charles Dickens. Mr. Jingles in the *Pickwick Papers* is one of the handful of most fascinating characters in English literature. Only a genius could have created Jingles.

It’s not the story (though the story matters). It’s not the way the author tells the story (though Dickens is usually marvelous at story telling). It is about the creatures-critters-characters-caricatures that take their place in the theater of Dickens’ books that make them magical. I know Mr. Pumblechook almost as well as I know my Uncle Joe. Uriah Heep represents for me all the unctuous evangelical hypocrites I have ever known.

I have never seen a film of *David Copperfield*, but I can see little David sitting in Peggotty’s cottage in Yarmouth by the Thames’ marshlands, listening to Mrs. Gummidge lament her life. I can see it more clearly than I can remember the rooms I lived in at Oxford when I first read that book.

We read different books and different authors for different reasons. We read Dickens because when he is at his best—and he is at his best a lot—there is nothing like him in English literature.

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