

Steven Tarske

Mr. Roy

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The Cultural Impact of Charles Dickens

Upon Hearing the name “Charles Dickens” many people recognize it and make the connection to this outstanding author from the 1800’s. However no one stops to take the time and figure out why his name is so widely known and how it came to be. Needless to say; in order for him to have had such a lasting impact through today, he must have also had a large impact back when he was alive.

Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Landport England. He had some private education while his dad worked as a navel clerk, but once his father was put into prison for not paying debts Charles had to work in a shoe polish factory. After some more education at the Wellington House Academy he went on to be a solicitor’s clerk. He taught himself shorthand in the evenings which lead to his next job as a reporter and further more into his literary career. The harder times he faced as a child had a lasting impact on him and can be seen in many of his novels. His books often had characters who were young and poor or that could relate to the everyday people. The personal connections within his books made them very popular with readers. Many of his works also focused on Christmas and charity and helped rebuild or implement traditions that we still have today.

Charles Dickens wrote five books pertaining to Christmas in all. They all focus on the the charitable part of the holiday and how people, friends, and family are the most important thing.

The first, “A Christmas Carol”, is also the most popular and well known today. This book has a deeper impact on us now than many people realize. Surrounding Christmas, the phrase “Don’t be a Scrooge.”, is used all the time during the holiday season and it is well understood that the person who said it is telling another not to be a downer about Christmas spirit. This common comparison to this fictional character made up by Dickens happens a lot and some do not even know where it came from. Mr. Scrooge was such a magnificent character used by Dickens that it became part of what people used after he wrote the book and is something we still use today.

The main point of “A Christmas Carol” is seen throughout the book. He used a variety of characters that were each in different situations to demonstrate the part of Christmas he felt was most important. Characters such as Tiny Tim, who was in a seemingly hopeless place, still had faith that everything would be okay. Also the main character, Mr. Scrooge, is transformed from a man who only wants to make money and hates everything about Christmas into to a charitable man who wants to help others. The book gave people an idea of what Christmas should be and many of them followed that image. It is an image that still influences our culture today.

Christmas was not always as big of a part of our culture as it is now however. In fact at one point it seemed as if the holiday would die out since it was once banned in England; but even after it had been reinstated it had died down to a one day celebration by the 1800’s. At the time Charles Dickens wrote the book, Christmas was at one of its lowest points. If it was not for him writing this book Christmas traditions and Christmas itself would not be what it is today. A “major custom which Dickens contributed to reviving and renewing, ...is that of carol singing.”(Pold, Tom, ¶ 12) The influence his books on the people also had an impact on the

holiday. The readers of his books followed what he wrote when they celebrated Christmas and many of the traditions and beliefs they started are still followed today.

The things that impacted Dickens' youth are often seen in his works as well and one of the most influential parts of his childhood was his education. He knew the importance of education and was a major supporter of it; specifically "ragged schools". Ragged schools were the schools that poorer kids, who did not have parents that could afford private education for them, attended. They charged little to nothing and that reflected the quality. He was appalled by the standards of the ragged schools and even more so the quality of the teachers and the lacking curriculum they taught.

The teachers at ragged schools struggled to rise out of the lower class while providing the children with quality education. This was furthermore made a problem when the government implemented the Revised Code. It extremely cut the certified teachers' salaries, "By 1865 male certificated teachers salaries had dropped from 95 pounds, on average, to 85 pounds annually."(Watt, K., ¶ 7) This lowered the quality of the education kids received and the quality of what teachers taught. The upper class citizens however, thought that the revised code was good because in their opinion the poor had been receiving more education than their "place" required and they felt that the government's money could be used for more important things.

He used his books to portray real things in the world such as the struggle with schooling as seen with many of his writings that focused on the education of younger people. He wanted to improve the knowledge that the youth received and believed so strongly in it that he openly called out what he saw to be wrong and encouraged the positive parts he saw. One of the things he thought needed more improvements was the education that the teachers had. In order to

improve the amount and the quality of the education kids received at ragged schools, Charles Dickens believed that teachers should have at least three years of higher college level learning to be qualified to teach.

The fight to improve ragged schools was a life long one for Dickens. It was not until the year he died that the Elementary Education Act was passed by Parliament. This act raised the standard for teacher training and ultimately improved the education of poor kids. He pushed hard to better the world of education. Without his work and influence, public education would be nowhere near the standards it has today.

Dickens career in literature started out editing for a newspaper. This led to him writing for newspapers which is where many of his novels were released in monthly segments. He continued to write and edit for papers until his death. The impact he had on society can still be seen today. In London you can see street signs and plaques that show the appreciation for what he did.

Charles Dickens had lots of success in his lifetime. In his time he became the most popular author in the world mostly because of what he wrote about. Dickens had an empathy for ordinary people which can be seen in his literature since he wrote about everyday things which made them appealing to all people. "He provided his contemporaries with vivid accounts of daily life - particularly of those living in poverty."(Smith, M. K., ¶ 7) He also used characters that found a place in peoples' hearts or that they could make a personal connection with. Dickens was also a reformer who used his writings to speak out about the injustices that he saw in the world, like he did with education, which he did not just fight for in his books but also publicly to help bring meaningful change that was much needed.

Charles Dickens was without a doubt a very inspirational figure in his time and still today. He used the influence he had to help better society through positive change. These changes he worked to bring about made a huge difference back in the 1800's when he helped make them and their impact lasts through today. It can be seen in the way we celebrate Christmas and the attitude we have surrounding the holiday; the importance of education for all people even the poor; and the fact that his works are still so well known today.

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