Charles Dickens
(1812 – 1870)
• Born in a large **lower middle class family** with great financial difficulties. He spends his **early years** outdoors, **reading voraciously** with a particular fondness for **the picaresque novels** of Tobias Smollett and Henry Fielding – two XVIII century novelists.

• At **12** he is sent to **work in a shoe-blacking factory** to help his **father imprisoned for debts**. This unpleasant experience will never be forgotten and marks the beginning of his **social commitment and identification with the poor and the oppressed**, which is always present in his novels.

• At **16** he is **apprenticed in an attorney’s office to study law**, but he soon gives up and **learns short-hand** to become a **reporter in the courts of law**.

• His experience in **the courts of law** will **provide him with material for the description of lawyers and their world**.

• At **24** he publishes his **first fictional work**. “**Sketches by Boz**”, a collection of articles about London people and scenes, published in instalments. It is received enthusiastically by both critics and public.

• This work is **followed by “The Pickwick papers”** which increases his popularity and helps him make some profits and get married.
• He starts a **frantic career as a novelist** which lasts all his life and which he manages to **combine with several other activities**.
• **He travels abroad** (America, Switzerland, Italy and France) and **writes accounts of his journeys**.
• He also keeps a **voluminous correspondence with all sorts of people**.
• He is an **amateur actor** and a **theatrical producer** and gives **public readings of his works**, also **to raise money for charities**.
• He is **deeply involved in philanthropic activities**, like the **running of a home for ex-prostitutes**. He in fact believes that **private charity is the best solution to reduce social evils**.
• He writes **14 novels** which are all **characterized by**:
  • 1) **elaborate, well-planned plots** and ....
  • 2) a **unique sense of humour**.
• He becomes the **editor of two periodicals**:
  • “**All the year round**”
  • “**Households words**”
Most important novels

• “Oliver Twist” (37-38)
• “Nicholas Nickelby” (38-39)
• These works can be defined as two adventure novels.
• In the tradition of the XVIII century picaresque novel, they are centred around the characters that give title to the books.
• “David Copperfield” (49-50), which is the most autobiographical of his novels, where he revisits his painful childhood.
• “Hard Times” (1853)
• “Great Expectations” (60-61) is considered his masterpiece.
• He also writes many short stories, e.g. “A Christmas Carol” (1843)
Literary influences

1. The tradition of 18th century “Picaresque novel” (which revolves around the life and adventures of a central character) is reflected in his use of humour and story planning.

2. Sir Walter Scott’s influence is evident in his descriptive techniques for people and landscapes;

3. His interest in the theatre helps him in the dialogue construction and use of melodramatic and sensational devices.

4. The Bible, fairy tales, nursery rhymes (traditional songs or poems for young children), the Gothic novels.
In his novels he attacks the worst social abuses of his time:
- the exploitation of child labour;
- the ill-treatment of pupils in extremely unpleasant schools;
- the unsafe factory conditions;
- the unsanitary slums;
- the selfishness and greediness of the rich upper classes;
Characterization

• Dickens shows his greatest talent in:
  • the description of characters:
  • particularly, the villainous, evil and wicked human beings who populate his fictional world.
  • These negative characters are not well-rounded, realistic figures, they are flat characters who never change throughout the story.
  • Dickens simply emphasizes one or two of their negative aspects which remain the same till the end of the story.
  • We may therefore define them as grotesque caricatures.
Description of Setting

• Dickens’s talent is also evident in:
  • the description of the environment.
  • Reality is the starting point but then he transforms it with his imagination.
  • Coketown, for example, in “Hard Times” recalls the typical environment of the mill towns in the north of England, but it is also ....
  • the symbol of the spiritual and economic (material) poverty that oppresses the working classes.
  • The name itself recalls the black colour that covers everything and confirms the general impression of an ugly, unpleasant town where living is monotonous, boring, dull and repetitive.
Linguistic devices

- He developed a very personal style based on the use of several linguistic devices:
  - Repetitions of words, phrases, and sentence structure (see text 56 “Coketown”);
  - Juxtaposition of contrasting images and opposite words (see, for example, the descriptions of Oliver and his friends and the workhouse authorities in text 54”);
  - A mixture of sad and comic details;
  - Use of hyperbole in the description of incidents and details;
  - Use of adjectives, verbs and nouns in pairs or group of three (e.g. see the description of Mr Gradgrind: “a man of fact and calculation”; “with a rule and a pair of scales; “ready to weigh and measure... human nature” etc.)
Dickens’s attitude towards society

- Even if he openly criticized the social abuses of the Victorian world.
- He cannot be considered a revolutionary, because he never questioned the fundamental values this society was based on.
- He, in fact, believed in its values: in particular he thought that the secret of happiness was to be found in ...
- Hard work; Romantic Love and Family life.
- In conclusion, he never suggested a revolutionary change in the structure of society.
- His solutions were not economic and political but paternalistic and moral.
- He identified the origins of all social evils in man’s hypocrisy, in his lack of love, in his greed for money and lack of charity.
- He was, therefore, convinced that the only solution was a moral change and a deeper sensitivity towards human suffering.
- As a consequence, he firmly maintained that the members of the rich upper class had to help those who suffered from poverty thanks to their privileged position inside society, ignoring that not to be poor is a human right.
The picaresque novel

- A popular sub-genre of prose fiction of Spanish origins.
- The term picaresque derives in fact from "pícaro", which means "rogue" or "rascal”, that is to say a man or a boy who behaves badly, but who you like in spite of this).
- It is usually satirical and depicts, in realistic and often humorous way, the adventures of the hero who belongs to the low social class and lives by his or her wits in a corrupt society.
- The work considered either the first picaresque novel or at least an antecedent to the genre is *The Life of Lazarillo de Tormes and of His Fortunes and Adversitities* (La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades) published anonymously in Spain, in 1554.