Nicholas Nickleby Study Guide

Quick Overview to the Life of Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens was born amid the tumult of the Industrial Revolution in Portsmouth, on the south coast of England on February 7, 1812. Pursued by creditors, John Dickens, his father, a clerk in the Navy Pay Office, moved his debt-plagued family from place to place before settling in “a mean little tenement” in Camden Town, After an ill-fated attempt by his mother, Elizabeth, to ease the family’s financial crisis by founding a school for girls, twelve-year-old Charles was sent to a shoe-blacking Warehouse, where he worked six days each week, twelve hours a day, for a mere six shillings.

It was inevitable that John Dickens’s improvidence would catch up with him. In 1824, unable to pay his debts, he landed in the Marshalsea, a debtor’s prison. After selling off the remainder of their possessions, Elizabeth and the youngest of their seven children joined John Dickens in the Marshalsea, while Charles was obliged to live on his own. Fortune smiled on the family, a few months later in the form of a small inheritance, but the stark reality of deprivation made a deep and lasting impression on Dickens. This experience cannot be emphasized too strongly, for Dickens would transform his “shameful secret” into works of genius, compassion, and enduring value.

Following two years of formal education at the Wellington House Academy, Dickens went to work as a clerk in an attorney’s office. Bright and ambitious, he mastered shorthand, a skill which by age twenty would gain him a reputation as London’s fastest and most accurate parliamentary reporter.

In 1833, the first of his published sketches, “A Dinner at Poplar,” appeared in the Monthly Magazine. His first book, a collection of Sketches by Boz, Illustrative of Everyday Life and Everyday People, was published on his twenty-fourth birthday to considerable acclaim.

Two months later, he married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of a co-worker on the Morning Chronicle. The marriage, while anything but happy, would endure for the sake of their ten children for twenty-three years before collapsing amid a storm of accusations and denials concerning Dickens’s alleged infidelity with Ellen Teman, a young actress, who would later become his mistress.

In 1836, Dickens was contracted to write The Pickwick Papers, the book that would catapult him to fame. While still in his twenties, he produced five major novels in amazingly rapid succession: The Pickwick Papers (1836—37), Oliver Twist (1837—38), Nicholas Nickleby (1838—39), The Old Curiosity Shop (1840—41), and Barnaby Rudge (1841).

After a not altogether pleasant visit to America in 1842, (recorded in American Notes, 1842), Dickens pulled out of a temporary stall in his career with Martin Chuzzlewit (1843), Dombey and Son (1846—48), and David Copperfield (1849—50), each of which displays a giant step forward in sophistication and complexity over his earlier works.

In his forties, Dickens wrote Bleak House (1852—53), Hard Times (1854), and Little Dorrit (1855—57), novels in which Dickens’s image of society can be seen to be growing ever darker. He followed with A Tale of Two Cities (1859), which appeared serially in Dickens’ own magazine, All The Year Round. And he ended his fourth decade with the book that many consider his greatest achievement, Great Expectations (1860—61).

Now in his fifties, in addition to a full calendar of public readings, magazine writing, and charity functions, Dickens produced Our Mutual Friend (1864—65). The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870) remained unfinished at his death.

Despite phenomenal success and popularity, Dickens throughout his life retained great sympathy for the underprivileged and remained a scathing critic of the injustices of his day. A strenuous schedule of public readings, the demands of serial writing, and the breakup of his marriage contributed to his death by a stroke in his fifty-ninth year. He died on June 9, 1870 and was laid to rest in Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, London.
Introduction to Nicholas Nickleby
Nicholas Nickleby is Dickens’s most theatrical novel, both literally and figuratively. Just before he wrote it, Dickens had been editing the memoirs of Grimaldi, a famous pantomime clown. It is no doubt a theatrical aura lingered about him, providing fresh inspiration for his new novel. Dedicated to his friend the actor William Macready, it is steeped in dramatic imagery, rhetoric, and characters and allusions, from sideshows and melodrama to tragedy and romance. Literary pirates were quick to note the tale’s dramatic possibilities: in Dickens and Popular Entertainment, Peter Schlicke notes that before its serial run was over, six adaptations of Nickleby had already appeared on the popular stage of that day.

The novel is also Dickens’s most joyful and effortless work, confirming its author’s assertion that he was never happier than when involved with the stage. Its plot, set pieces, and characters amount to a checklist of every cliché of nineteenth-century melodrama. There’s a poignant deathbed scene, a duel, a lost legacy, a father-and-son reunion. Its leads are stock character types: Nicholas, an earnest and chivalrous hero and Kate, his innocent maidenly sister, wonderful sidekicks and with several villains with both serious and comic sensibilities. When Mr. Crummles, with his usual rhetorical flair, hails Nicholas, “Farewell, my noble, my lion-hearted boy!” (in blank verse), we know that Dickens is gently mocking the stage manager’s/actor’s exaggerated mannerisms. But what the showman says is true: Nicholas is precisely the kind of hero who could be seen every night on Mr. Crummles’s provincial stage. In Nicholas, Dickens in a bigger theatrical flair has created a noble, lion-hearted young hero—and in teasing Mr. Crummles, he draws attention to his own melodramatic posturing.

In NN, as in all melodrama, the line between good and evil is unwavering. Pure character types, those embodying a single moral trait, evoke a gut response. Dickens doesn’t want to tug at our emotions; he wants to wrench them out of us: tears, outrage, laughter, and delight.

Dotheboys Hall
Squeers, the sadistic schoolmaster of Dotheboys Hall (a place name now synonymous with any brutal school), takes pride in its place among the villains in Dickens’s rogues’ gallery. His roots go back to the medieval stage tradition of the Vice, the often humorous personification of evil. In fact the Squeers family are the seven deadly sins rolled into one domestic bliss; their household fairly vibrates with joyful viciousness. Thus the porcine Wackford junior, urged to eat until his skin glistens, is used to advertise the bounties awaiting each child at Dotheboys; Mrs. Squeers thrusts brimstone and treacle down the throats of her charges with all the tenderness of a prison matron. Fanny alone, plain, jealous, and petty, merits some sympathy—and amused contempt. (Only a modern reader could experience such a mixed response to Fanny; to Dickens and his contemporaries, a shrill and bitter woman was merely an object of comic derision.)

Dickens intended the Dotheboys section to be a scorching exposé of the so-called Yorkshire schools, those “educational” institutions situated in the remote north where parents sent unwanted children. That Squeers’s evil belongs to the real world, and that it involves suffering children, momentarily lifts the novel out of the artificial realm of romance and melodrama, placing it squarely in a particular time and place. Our response to this villain is thus more complicated than just a hiss and a boo. Squeers isn’t an unsmiling knave, like Ralph Nickleby, but a figure of exuberant comedy. Few writers besides Dickens, Shakespeare, or Dostoyevsky can lace cruelty with such antic humor. Even as the schoolmaster evokes our outrage, we can’t help smiling at his pedagogical methods and his remarkable spelling:

“We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of book, he goes and does it. - “Where’s the second boy?”

“Please, sir, he’s weeding the garden,” replied a small voice.

“To be sure,” said Squeers, by no means disconcerted. “So he is. B-o-t, bot, t-i-n; bottin, n-e-y, ney, bottinney, noun
Some Scene Stealers
Although Nicholas remains firmly in the center of the action, it’s the minor funny figures who steal the show. For, before he became a writer, Dickens wanted to be an actor specializing in comedic roles (this passion was latered served in his second career of platform performances), and any one of these characters in Nicholas Nickleby could be a leaping off point for sketch performance in the “Nicholas Nickleby Revue.”

Indeed, in his brilliant introduction to the Penguin edition, Michael Slater notes that “role playing is the living heart of the novel.” Few see themselves or their world as it exists, and practically all create roles for themselves that they enact on their own private stage. Thus Dickens writes, Fanny Squeers “looked into her own little glass, where, like most of us, she saw—not herself, but the reflection of some pleasant image in her own brain.” Paradoxically, human beings are most real when they pretend to be something they’re not. Homo sapiens are a role-playing creatures.

The Crummles Company
However, the living embodiment of theater in the novel is Vincent Crummles, the manager of the acting company Nicholas joins after leaving Dotheboys Hall. Dickens loved writing about bad actors and is never better than when depicting their grand illusions, heightened mannerisms, and affectations. The Crummleses are not only actors but actors playing actors; that is, they perform onstage and off. The entire family represents the repertoire of the popular theater of Dickens’s youth. In her younger days Mrs. Crummles was known for her spine-chilling rendition of “The Blood-Drinker’s Burial”; their daughter, Ninetta, “the Infant Phenomenon,” who has been the same age for five years, is practicing a raucous pas de deux with the troupe’s leading man entitled “The Indian Maiden and the Savage.” Even the pony, boasts Mr. Crummles, “is quite one of us.” An equine Barrymore, his mother “ate apple-pie at a circus for upwards of fourteen years—fired pistols, and went to bed in a nightcap; and, in short, took the low comedy entirely.” His father, Mr. Crummles adds, “was a dancer.”

Mr. Crummles and his actors find it difficult to discern where the stage ends and real life begins. Their embraces are stylized stage hugs, “which, as everybody knows, are performed by the embracer’s laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it.” Ordinary objects are potential props, and any occasion an opportunity for a staged “event.” When Mr. Crummles sadly accepts Nicholas’s decision to leave the troupe, his spirits rally as he begins to plan a series of farewell performances: ‘We can have positively your last appearance, on Thursday—re-engagement for one night more, on Friday—and, yielding to the wishes of numerous influential patrons, who were disappointed in obtaining seats, on Saturday.”

Paradoxically, Mr. Crummles is sincere in his affectations, which through the years have formed his identity; the actors, even with their professional rivalries and vanities, are the most genuinely kind people in the book. Next to their generosity, the ultra virtuous Cheeryble brothers s

In the Crummles section, Dickens lovingly parodies popular genres, especially pantomime, romance, and melodrama. When Mr. Lenville, the leading tragedian, discreetly inquires about his part in the upcoming production, Nicholas hastily improvises a scene:

Elements of a Dickens Genre and his Original Serialization
Most of Dickens’s major novels were first written in monthly or weekly installments in journals such as Master Humphrey’s Clock and Household Words, later reprinted in book form. These installments made the stories cheap, accessible and the series of regular cliff-hangers made each new episode widely anticipated and commercialized. Even if you were one of the illiterate public you could still be in on the latest happenings by paying to hear the latest installment read aloud in a pub or civic hall or somebody’s home. Language was a constantly and changing organism during the Victorian time which with Dickens took great relish in playing with. In addition, part of Dickens’s great talent
was to incorporate this episodic writing style but still end up with a coherent novel at the end at the same time keep the public coming back for more.

A great example of that appears in the monthly novel Oliver Twist. At one point in this work, Dickens had Oliver become embroiled in a robbery. That particular monthly installment concludes with young Oliver being shot. Readers expected that they would only have to wait a month to find out the outcome of that gunshot. However, Dickens did not reveal what became of young Oliver in the succeeding installment. Rather, the reading public was forced to wait two months to discover if the boy lived.

Another important impact of Dickens's episodic writing style resulted from his exposure to the opinions of his readers. Since Dickens did not write the chapters very far ahead of their publication, he was allowed to witness the public reaction and alter the story depending on those public reactions.

In addition, Dickens's novels were, among other things, works of social commentary. He was a fierce critic of the poverty and social stratification of Victorian society. Dickens's second novel, Oliver Twist (1839), shocked readers with its images of poverty and crime and was responsible for the clearing of the actual London slum that was the basis of the story's Jacob's Island. In addition, with the character of the tragic prostitute, Nancy, Dickens "humanized" such women for the reading public; women who were regarded as "unfortunates," inherently immoral casualties of the Victorian class/economic system.

Dickens is often described as using 'idealized' characters and highly sentimental scenes to contrast with his caricatures and the ugly social truths he reveals. The story of Nell Trent in The Old Curiosity Shop (1841) was received as incredibly moving by its original readers but viewed as ludicrously sentimental by Oscar Wilde (1854-1900):"You would need to have a heart of stone," he declared in one of his famous witticisms, "not to laugh at the death of Little Nell." In 1903 G. K. Chesterton said, "It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to."

In Oliver Twist Dickens provides readers with an idealized portrait of a young boy so inherently and unrealistically 'good' that his values are never subverted by either brutal orphanages or coerced involvement in a gang of young pickpockets.

Dickens also employs incredible happy and most fortunate coincidences (e.g., Oliver Twist turns out to be the lost nephew of the upper class family that randomly rescues him from the dangers of the pickpocket group). Such coincidences are a staple of eighteenth century picaresque novels such as Henry Fielding's (1707-1754) Tom Jones that Dickens enjoyed so much. But, to Dickens, these were not just cheap plot devices but an index of the humanism that led him to believe that good wins out in the end and often in unexpected ways.

All authors might be said to incorporate autobiographical elements in their fiction, but with Dickens this is very noticeable, even though he took pains to mask what he considered his shameful, lowly past. He would repeatedly draw from them and would not reveal that this was where he gathered his realistic accounts of squalor. Very few knew the details of his early life until six years after his death when John Forster published a biography on which Dickens had collaborated. A shameful past in Victorian times could taint reputations, just as it did for some of his characters, and this may have been Dickens's own fear.

Children's Rights and Dickens
Reading Nicholas Nickleby one might wonder. Certainly Dickens wasted no effort in romanticizing the routine brutalities and shocking cruelties of grammar school life in England at the time. Dotheboys Hall is a miserable institution where the boys are subjected to unspeakable hardships. For his part, Wackford Squeers is a contemptible villain who thinks nothing of beating his students, and who literally steals the food from the mouths of his charges. For a modern reader it's the kind of horrifying image one might view on a TV News Program.

Was he exaggerating? Could anything like Dotheboys Hall have existed in real life?
As previously mentioned, Dickens was an obsessively autobiographical writer. Most of his own boyhood experiences found their way into his books. He was also a writer with a highly developed social conscience. Though Dickens is remembered most often as a writer of comic novels, he had powerful contempt for social injustice. He especially allied himself with the causes of the poor.

In fact, though Nicholas Nickleby is overall a far more buoyantly optimistic work than, say, the darkly comic Oliver Twist, both novels are finely representative of the social conditions that existed in Dickens’ England. Dickens made extensive travels to schools throughout England prior to writing Nicholas Nickleby, and he made extensive use of his notes in creating the fictional Dotheboys Hall. The book was serialized in twenty segments beginning in 1838, and was a huge success with the public, selling more than fifty thousand copies.

What might surprise a contemporary reader most in Nicholas Nickleby is the shocking and systematic mistreatment of children. The truth is the very concept of “childhood” as we know it today was a relatively novel concept in the nineteenth century. Society made little distinction between what we customarily refer to as a child and an adult. For instance, children were usually tried in court as adults.

Today we are shocked at stories, of children or teenagers who kill. Should they be tried as adults? We wonder. The truth is most people assume children are different from adults. We assume that they are more innocent and less likely to understand the distinction between right and wrong behavior. But in England in 1780 there were more than two hundred crimes that a child could be convicted of—for which he could be hanged! Not only were children not treated as children, but often they had fewer rights and privileges than property.

In a particularly notorious trial in 1761, a woman from Norwich was convicted of deliberately blinding her children. Why did she do it? Blind children made better beggars. For this unspeakable crime she received a sentence of two years. And...the children were not her own. Amazingly, if they had been the courts would have ruled in her favor! Her only crime was that she damaged “property” belonging to someone else.

The concept of a child as a person separate from an adult—and someone deserving of special rights and protections—evolved slowly over a long period of time. It wasn’t until the invention of the printing press becoming more abundant in the Victorian Age (with its technology advances) that popularized the notion of literacy for everyone created the need for schooling, that the notion of “childhood” really took root. Until that time children—after the age of seven years old—were treated as adults. Why seven? That was, on average, the age when children mastered verbal skills. Once a child was able to communicate, he or she was considered ready to fully participate in the adult world. It was only after the invention of the printing press that the notion of “childhood” took on a life of its own. The notion of “schooling” was not far behind.

It may seem hard to imagine a time when children did not go to school. Today, all children born in the United States are required by law to attend school. This was not always the case.

The average child growing up in the Middle Ages did not attend school. In fact, schools for children did not exist. It was during the early nineteenth century that schools for children as we know them came to exist. In England, for example, it was only after 1840 that schools began to appear on a widespread scale and even then it is a very basic education for the general public usually ending somewhere around the age of 12. Only those of wealth or of “great intellectual gifts and skills on scholarship” were able to attend Prep Schools and then move on to college if their competency warranted so.

But till then schooling was not for everyone. The rapid economic expansion that came to be known as the Industrial Revolution was putting a huge burden on society to provide cheap labor. Children—especially poor children—more and more were being forced into factory jobs.
Dickens experienced the brutality of factory life firsthand. When his father fell into debt the eldest son was sent to prison. Twelve-year-old Charles was taken out of school and forced to work in a boot-blackening factory for six shillings a week to help support the family. Dickens remembered it as the most horrible period of his life.

Children from wealthier families attended school but for the unlucky children of the poor, most could expect a life of gruesome factory work for long hours and low pay.

It wasn't only in England that children were put to work. In the United States the exploitation of children was a familiar practice in the many “mill towns” that dotted the Northeast. Immigrant families were hit the hardest. Most were desperate for money and needed children— many as young as seven and eight—to work in order to help support the family.

Charles Dickens never forgot what it was like to suffer twelve-hour days breaking his back in a boot blacking factory ‘for close to no pay. It was partly because of his writing that readers became familiar with the terrible conditions of the factories. In time, movements sprang up all over England and elsewhere demanding—among other improvements—that child labor be restricted.

Eventually legislation was passed that regulated child labor but even today there are factories or farms that illegally employ children as laborers. One hears about it on the news every now and then. True, it is not nearly as common as it once was, but in other countries child labor is very much an everyday practice.

In conclusion, it should be cited that NN is not a work of social realism in the way that Upton Sinclair's The Jungle is. But it is a work of art that shines a powerful light on a social injustice. The genius of Charles Dickens is that a book about a terrible injustice can also dazzle us as entertainment.

Victorian London

Victorian London was the largest, most spectacular city in the world. While Britain was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, its capital was both reaping the benefits and suffering the consequences. In 1800 the population of London was around a million souls. That number would swell to 4.5 million by 1880. While fashionable areas like Regent and Oxford streets were growing in the west, new docks supporting the city’s place as the world's trade center were being built in the east. Perhaps the biggest impact on the growth of London was the coming of the railroad in the 1830s, which displaced thousands and accelerated the expansion of the city.

The price of this explosive growth and domination of world trade was untold squalor and filth. In his excellent biography, Dickens, Peter Ackroyd notes "If a late twentieth-century person were suddenly to find himself in a tavern or house of the period, he would be literally sick – sick with the smells, sick with the food, sick with the atmosphere around him".

Imagine yourself in the London of the early 19th century. The homes of the upper and middle class exist is close proximity to areas of unbelievable poverty and filth. Rich and poor alike are thrown together in the crowded city streets. Street sweepers attempt to keep the streets clean of manure, the result of thousands of horse-drawn vehicles. The city's thousands of chimney pots are belching coal smoke, resulting in soot which seems to settle everywhere. In many parts of the city raw sewage flows in gutters that empty into the Thames. Street vendors hawking their wares add to the cacophony of street noises. Pickpockets, prostitutes, drunks, beggars, and vagabonds of every description add to the colorful multitude.

Inside the problem is not much better. Personal cleanliness is not a big priority, nor is clean laundry. In close, crowded rooms the smell of unwashed bodies is stifling. It is unbearably hot by the fire, numbingly cold away from it.

At night the major streets are lit with feeble gas lamps. Side and secondary streets may not be lit at all and link bearers are hired to guide the traveler to his destination. Inside, a candle or oil lamp struggles against the darkness and blacken the ceilings.
In Little Dorrit Dickens describes a London rain storm: "In the country, the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to the gutters."

Sanitation and Disease in Victorian London
Until the second half of the 19th century London residents were still drinking water from the very same portions of the Thames that the open sewers were discharging into. Several outbreaks of Cholera in the mid 19th century, along with The Great Stink of 1858, when the stench of the Thames caused Parliament to recess, brought a cry for action. The link between drinking water tainted with sewage and the incidence of disease slowly dawned on the Victorians. Dr John Snow proved that all victims in a Soho area cholera outbreak drew water from the same Broad Street pump.

Sir Joseph Bazalgette, chief engineer of the new Metropolitan Board of Works (1855), put into effect a plan, completed in 1875, which finally provided adequate sewers to serve the city. In addition, laws were put in effect which prevented companies supplying drinking water from drawing water from the most heavily tainted parts of the Thames and required them to provide some type of filtration.

In the Streets in Victorian London
After the Stage Carriages Act of 1832 the hackney cab was gradually replaced by the omnibus as a means of moving about the city. By 1900 3000 horse-drawn buses were carrying 500 million passengers a year. A traffic count in Cheapside and London Bridge in 1850 showed a thousand vehicles an hour passing through these areas during the day. All of this added up to an incredible amount of manure, which had to be removed from the streets.

The Law in Victorian London
The Metropolitan Police, London's first police force, was created by Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel (hence the name Peelers and, eventually, Bobbies) in 1829 with headquarters in what would become known as Scotland Yard. The old London watch system, in effect since Elizabethan times, was eventually abolished.

The Poor in Victorian London
The Victorian answer to dealing with the poor and indigent was the New Poor Law, enacted in 1834. Previously it had been the burden of the parishes to take care of the poor. The new law required parishes to band together and create regional workhouses where aid could be applied for.

The workhouse was little more than a prison for the poor. Civil liberties were denied, families were separated, and human dignity was destroyed. The true poor often went to great lengths to avoid this relief. Dickens, because of the childhood trauma caused by his father's imprisonment for debt and his consignment to the blacking factory to help support his family, was a true champion to the poor. He repeatedly pointed out the atrocities of the system through his novels.

With the turn of the century and Queen Victoria's death in 1901 the Victorian period came to a close. Many of the ills of the 19th century were remedied through education, technology and social reform... and by the social consciousness raised by the immensely popular novels of Dickens.

Breakdown of NN's Characters
As in most of Dickens' works, there is a sprawling number of characters in the book. Here are some of the ones we will be doing in our cutting of the play

Nicholas Nickleby The hero of the novel. His father has died and left Nicholas and his family penniless. Nicholas is not a typical hero: he can be violent, naïve, and emotional. But he is devoted to his friends and family and fiercely defiant of those who wrong the ones he loves.

Ralph Nickleby The book's major antagonist, Nicholas's uncle. He seems to care about nothing but money and takes an immediate dislike to the idealistic Nicholas. But, as gruff as he is, he harbors something of a soft spot for Kate. Ralph's anger at Nicholas's beating of Wackford Squeers leads to a vow to destroy the younger man, but the only man Ralph ends up destroying is himself. When it is revealed that Smike was his son, and that the boy died hating him, he takes his own life.
Kate Nickleby Nicholas's younger sister. Kate is a fairly passive character, typical of Dickensian women, but she shares some of her brother's fortitude and strong will. She does not blanch at hard labor to earn her keep and defends herself against the lecherous Sir Mulberry Hawk. She finds well-deserved happiness with Frank Cheeryble.

Mrs. Nickleby Nicholas and Kate's mother, who provides much of the novel's comic relief. The muddleheaded Mrs. Nickleby does not see the true evil her children encounter until it is directly pointed out to her. She is stubborn, prone to long digressions on irrelevant or unimportant topics and unrealistic fantasies, and an often vague grasp of what is going on around her.

Smike A poor drudge living in Squeers' "care". Smike is a pathetic figure, perpetually ill and a cripple, who has been in Squeers' care since he was very young. Nicholas gives him the courage to run away, but when that fails Nicholas saves him again and he latches himself on to his protector. He falls in love with Kate, but his heart is broken when she falls in love with Frank Cheeryble. After Smike dies of "a dread disease" (tuberculosis), it is revealed that he is Ralph Nickleby's son.

Newman Noggs: Ralph's clerk, who becomes Nicholas's closest friend. He was once a businessman of high standing but went bankrupt. He is an alcoholic, and his general good nature and insight into human nature is hidden under a veneer of irrational tics and erratic behavior.

Miss La Creevy: The Nicklebys' landlady. A plump, kindly woman in her fifties, she is a miniature-portrait painter. She is the first friend the Nicklebys make in London, and one of the truest. She is rewarded for her good-heartedness when she falls in love with Tim Linkinwater.

Wackford Squeers: A cruel, one-eyed, Yorkshire schoolmaster. He runs "Dotheboys Hall", a place where unwanted children can be sent away. He mistreats the boys horribly, whipping them regularly. He gets his comeuppance at the hands of Nicholas when he is beaten in retaliation for the whipping of Smike. He travels to London after he recovers and partakes in more bad business, fulfilling his grudge against Nicholas by becoming a close partner in Ralph's schemes to fake Smike's parentage and later to hide the will of Madeline Bray. He is arrested during the last of these tasks and sentenced to transportation to Australia.

Mr. Snawley An oil merchant who puts his two stepsons in Squeers' "care".

Mrs. Squeers Squeers' formidable wife. If possible, she is even crueler and less affectionate than her husband to the boys in their care.

Fanny Squeers The Squeers' daughter. She is 23 and is beginning to feel the pressure to find a man to settle down with. She falls in love with Nicholas until he bluntly rebuffs her affections, at which point she begins to hate him. Tilda Price (later Browdie) is her best friend, but the relationship is strained by Fanny's pride and spitefulness. She is full of bluster and is under severe delusions about her own beauty and station.

Young Wackford Squeers The Squeers' loutish, piggy son. He is mainly preoccupied with filling his belly as often as he can and bullying his father's boys, to his father's great joy.

John Browdie A bluff Yorkshireman, Tilda's fiancé, later her husband. Although he and Nicholas get off on the wrong foot, they become good friends when John helps Nicholas escape from Yorkshire. He later rescues Smike from Squeers again, proving himself a good and intelligent man. He is not, however, well-schooled in manners and has a rough and boisterous air.

Matilda Price (Browdie) Fanny's best friend and Browdie's fiancée; she goes by the name of Tilda. A pretty girl of 18, she puts up with Fanny's pettiness because of their childhood friendship, but later breaks with her. She is rather coquettish, but settles down happily with John Browdie.

Mr. Vincent Crummles Head of the Crummles theatre troupe, a larger-than-life theatre manager and actor who takes Nicholas under his wing. He takes great pride in his profession, but also sometimes yearns for a quieter life settled down with his wife and children.

Mrs. Crummles, Mr. Crummles' wife, a glamorous dowager. A formidable but loving presence to the actors in her troupe.

The "Infant Phenomenon", Miss Ninetta Crummles, Mr. and Mrs. Crummles daughter. She is a very prominent member of the Crummles troupe, and a dancing part is written for her in every performance. She is supposedly ten years old, but is actually closer to fifteen, having been kept on a steady diet of gin to keep her looking young.

Mr. Folair a pantomimist with the company. He is an apt flatterer, but does not hesitate to say his opinion when backs are turned.

Miss Snevellicci. The talented leading lady of the Crummles troupe. She and Nicholas flirt with romance, but nothing comes of it, and she eventually leaves the troupe to get married.

Mr. Lenville an overdramatic, self-centered Tragedian, who becomes jealous of the attention Nicholas is getting as an actor, and attempts to pull his nose in front of the company, an act which results in the actor himself being knocked down and his cane broken by Nicholas.

RSC Theatre Adaptation
NN has been adapted for stage, film or television at least seven times. Perhaps the most extraordinary version (from playwright David Edgar) was created in 1980 when a large-scale stage production of the novel was performed in the West End by the Royal Shakespeare Company. It was a theatrical experience which lasted more than ten hours (counting intermissions and a dinner break - the actual playing time was approximately eight-and-a-half hours). The production received both critical and popular acclaim. All of the actors played multiple roles because of the huge number of characters, except for Roger Rees, who played Nicholas and David Threlfall who played Smike (due to the large amount of time they were on stage). The play moved to Broadway in 1981. In 1982 the RSC had the show
recorded as three two-hour and one three-hour episodes for Channel 4, where it became the channel's first drama. In 1983, it was shown on television in the United States, where it won an Emmy Award for Best Mini-Series. Full fledged revivals of this version are few and far between due to its massive demands. However the most recent well known professional one was a two-month London transfer in 2007 to the Gielgud Theatre for a Chichester Festival Theatre production (this is a famous summer theatre festival in England) of the original play.

**Questions on Study Guide for Nicholas Nickleby.**

1. What manual childhood situation had a tremendous influence in Charles Dickens for the rest of his life?
2. What did Charles Dickens father do for a living?
3. What is Charles Dickens birthday?
4. Which NN character is miniature-portrait painter?
5. In a 50 word essay describe how the notion and idea of childhood come about in our culture?
6. What did Dickens do to create suspense when Oliver got shot for the readers?
7. Where did Charles Dickens go to school?
8. What was biggest impact on the growth of London in the Victorian era?
9. The Study Guide believes it’s fair to say that in NN Dickens writes on two levels. What are they?
10. What skill was Charles Dickens known for in his parliamentary reporting?
11. The actual playing time of RSC adaptation of NN was how long?
12. Which book made Charles Dickens famous?
13. After what age was a child treated as an adult?
14. Which book is considered to be Dickens best work ever?
15. Where is Dickens buried?
16. What beginning and end dates are consider the Victorian era?
17. Poor children due to economic expansion were often forced into what types of jobs?
18. In 1780 how many crimes could a child be convicted of?
19. Which NN character is a pantomimist with the Crumml es company?
20. Miss Ninetta Crummles stage name in NN is?
21. Which group of supporting characters in NN finds it difficult to discern where the stage ends and real life begins?
22. How many serialized installments were there for Nicholas Nickleby when it was first published?
23. In Victorian London major streets were lit by what at night?
24. David Edgar believes that Dickens writes what types of characters very well?
25. Who adapted NN for the RSC?
26. Why were there several outbreaks of Cholera in Victorian London?
27. Who said “It is not the death of Little Nell, but the life of Little Nell, that I object to.”
28. Dickens took great pains to mask what and why did he do so?
29. Which NN character puts up with Fanny’s pettiness because of their childhood friendship?
30. In 1761, a woman from Norwich was convicted of what?
31. What age was a child considered an adult during the early part of Victorian time?
32. Please define matron?
33. If you couldn't read how you might find out what was going to in Dickens' latest story?
34. What did Dickens father do for a living?
35. What did Charles Dickens desire to be before becoming a successful writer?