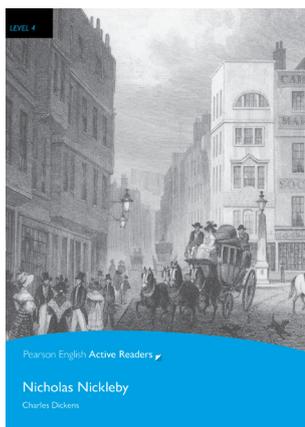


Nicholas Nickleby

Charles Dickens



Summary

The Nicklebys (Nicholas, his mother, sister Kate) are penniless after the death of Mr Nickleby. In their poverty and desperation they seek help from Nicholas's Uncle Ralph, a mean-spirited, cruel moneylender. Nicholas's independent attitude angers Ralph and Nicholas is sent away to Dotheboys Hall to teach. He is upset by the mistreatment of the children there by Headmaster Wackford Squeers, and is disgusted by the cruel treatment given to a boy called Smike. Nicholas thrashes the evil Squeers and escapes to London with Smike, who becomes his close companion.

In London, Nicholas continues his one-man crusade against the ill treatment of his family by Ralph and the persecution of his sister by Sir Mulberry Hawk. After Nicholas finally makes a home for his family. With the help of Newman Noggs (Ralph's clerk) and the Cheeryble brothers (benevolent businessmen), Ralph gets his eventual comeuppance. Although Smike (who turns out to be Ralph's long-lost son) dies, there is a general sense of justice at the end of the story.

Chapters 1–2: Ralph Nickleby, a moneylender and Nicholas's uncle, receives a letter saying that his brother has died and that the widow and children have been left penniless. Ralph visits them and treats them scornfully. He tells Nicholas of a job at Dotheboys Hall, a school for boys in Yorkshire, owned by Wackford Squeers, and promises to provide for the family if Nicholas is given the job. Squeers hires Nicholas as his assistant and they travel together to the school. After they arrive at Dotheboys, Nicholas soon realises how harsh Squeers's rules are and how mistreated the boys are. Nicholas especially pities Smike, a boy who is made to do all the hard work and who is cruelly punished.

Chapters 3–4: Nicholas finds life at Dotheboys hard and is appalled by the cruel treatment given to boys and to Smike, who runs away. Nicholas has a fistfight with Squeers and leaves the school. On his way back to London, Nicholas finds Smike and agrees to take him with him. Nicholas finds cheap lodgings in London and a job as a private French teacher. When Nicholas visits his mother and sister, he overhears his uncle telling them that he is a thief who has stolen a ring from Squeers and has run away with one of the children. Nicholas argues with Ralph and tries to defend himself from all the accusations but finally decides to leave London once again so as to protect his mother and sister.

Chapters 5–6: In London, Kate finds a job as Mrs Witterly's companion. Unfortunately, one of Ralph's best customers, Sir Mulberry Hawk, likes Kate and insists on spending time with her despite her turning him down.

Kate asks Ralph for help but he refuses to lose his best client. Newman Noggs overhears the conversation and writes to Nicholas, who decides to come back to London. Nicholas fights Sir Mulberry and orders him to stay away from his sister. He also has his mother and sister move out from Ralph's house and writes a letter to his uncle rejecting any further help from him.

Chapters 7–8: Ralph and Squeers join up to take revenge on Nicholas. Mrs Nickleby and Kate are introduced to Smike and they decide to let him stay with them. Nicholas meets Mr Cheeryble and his brother and they introduce him to Mr Linkinwater with whom he will work at the Cheerybles' counting-house. Nicholas is also invited to move to a small cottage owned by the Cheerybles together with his family. Squeers kidnaps Smike and holds him captive at Snawley's house. Fortunately, Smike is helped to escape by friend John Browdie and he finally reaches the Nicklebys' home.

Chapters 9–11: Nicholas falls in love with a poor artist, Madeline, who is supported by the Cheerybles. Nicholas agrees to pay for some of her paintings without her father knowing that the money comes from the Cheerybles.

What Nicholas doesn't know is that she is to marry one of her father's creditors, Arthur Gride. Ralph and Squeers pretend that their friend Mr Snawley is Smike's father and they almost get away with taking the boy with them. The Nicklebys are increasingly more worried about the boy's character and health. When Nicholas learns that Madeline is about to marry Gride, he tries to persuade her not to do so. He finally saves her from the marriage.

Chapters 12–14: After her father's death, Madeline moves in with the Cheerybles. Smike's health worsens

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and Nicholas takes him to a small farmhouse in Devon to rest. However, Smike soon dies. Squeers is imprisoned, and when the boys at Dotheboys Hall learn this, they all run away and go back home to their families. Ralph finds out that Smike was his son. The following day Ralph, regretting what he had done to his nephew and his own son – and family – hangs himself. Nicholas and Madeline get married, and so do Kate and Frank Cheeryble. The Nicklebys finally find happiness.

About the author

Charles Dickens was born in 1812 in Portsmouth, a naval town on the south coast of England. He spent his childhood in Chatham, to the east of London. His father was imprisoned for unpaid debts, and the twelve-year-old Charles had to work in a blacking factory making shoe polish. This was a miserable time for young Dickens and may be the reason why the themes of poverty, injustice and brutality recur frequently in his novels. In 1827 he worked as a clerk in a law company, but soon realised he hated Law almost as much as he hated making shoe polish. He decided to become a journalist instead.

In 1832, Dickens became a reporter. He married Catherine Hogarth, the daughter of the editor of *The Evening Chronicle* newspaper. His big break came when publishers Chapman and Hall commissioned him to write a series of stories based on a fictitious club. *The Posthumous Papers of Pickwick Club* was published in twenty monthly papers in 1836–37. By the end, the story had 40,000 readers. Dickens became one of the most popular writers in England. He wrote a large number of novels and stories, including *A Christmas Carol*, *David Copperfield*, *Bleak House*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*.

Dickens loved the theatre. He fell in love with an actress, Ellen Ternan. His reading tours in the United States were popular. During his second visit there, in 1867, he became ill. He gave one of his last public readings in 1870 and died in June the same year, aged 58, leaving an unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Background and themes

Education: Dickens visited a school in the north of England and was so shocked by the cruel treatment given to the pupils by the schoolmaster, William Shaw, that he used the school as a model for Dotheboys Hall. The description of Dotheboys Hall caused shock and consternation. Questions were asked in Parliament and the government was forced to investigate the problem. Eventually, action was taken against real schools like the one Dickens had seen. Dickens was always very proud of his success in bringing such evil places to public attention.

The class system: The members of the establishment with power and/or money, such as Squeers, Sir Mulberry, Ralph, Mrs Witterly and Gride in the story, are cynical, vain, cruel, selfish manipulators and exploiters of those more disadvantaged than themselves, such as Nicholas, Kate, Madeline and Smike.

Poverty: In Dickens's previous novel, *Oliver Twist*, poverty dehumanises the characters. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, however, the harshness of injustice and poverty is not allowed to vanquish the basic qualities of the human spirit. People such as Kate and Nicholas, Smike, Newman Noggs and Madeline, retain fundamental decency and kindness, and they are allowed to enjoy, to varying degrees, a sense of peace and justice by the end of the story.

Fate: Chance and fate always seem to play a major part in Dickens's novels. Without the timely intervention of the Cheeryble brothers, it is unlikely that the forces of good, represented by Nicholas, Kate, Newman Noggs and Madeline, would have overcome the forces of evil, embodied in Squeers, Ralph, Gride and Sir Mulberry.

Ultimately, the story is about the search for happiness in a cruel, unjust world. It is an adventure story, sometimes tragic, often amusing. It is the mixture of a serious message with entertainment that makes it as popular and as relevant today as it was nearly 200 years ago. There have been many film, stage and television adaptations of the story, most recently a 2002 film by Douglas McGrath with Jamie Bell (of *Billy Elliot* fame) as Smike.

Discussion activities

Before reading

- Discuss:** Talk about children and poverty.
What do you know or imagine society was like in the 1800s? How did poor people live? What happened to families when the father died and they were penniless?
- Discuss:** Talk about children and education. Find out what students know about boarding schools.
- Write:** Tell students to imagine what life was like in a boarding school run by a strict schoolmaster during the late 1800s. Write their answers on the board.
- Discuss:** Talk about class differences.
In groups, students leaf through the book looking for pictures that illustrate class differences.
What are these people like? Do you think they all belong to the same social class? Why (not)? Can you tell who is rich and who is poor? What do you think they do every day? How do you think they are treated by others? Why?
- Film:** Watch the first three to five scenes of the film *Nicholas Nickleby* (2002) by Douglas McGrath with the sound off. Divide the class into two.
 - Have the first half choose one of the scenes and imagine what the characters say.

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- b The second half draws a chart describing which issues are similar and different from what they have read in the book. Play the film again and check.

Chapters 1–2

After reading

- 6 **Role play:** Get students to work in groups of five. *You are Nicholas, Smike and other boarders at Dotheboys Hall. Write the dialogue between all the boys complaining about the place. At some point they will be interrupted by an angry Mr Squeers! What happens, then?* Ask them to act out their dialogues for the class.
- 7 **Write:** Get students to write on the following. *Ralph receives a letter from Mrs Nickleby but we never get to read what it says. Imagine you are Mrs Nickleby. You are very sad and need help. What would you write in the letter to the rich brother of your dead husband?*

Chapters 3–4

After reading

- 8 **Guess:** Get students to work in groups. Each student chooses to be one of the characters in Chapters 3–4 (Nicholas, Fanny, John, Tilda, Smike or others). They take it in turns to describe themselves and what they do and the others guess who they are.

Chapters 5–6

After reading

- 9 **Discuss:** Have students talk about a dinner party. Put students into small groups. Ask them to plan a dinner party for the following guests: Newman Noggs, Nicholas, Fanny Squeers, Mr Squeers, Ralph, Mrs Nickleby, Sir Mulberry, Kate, Mrs Witterly, Smike. *Where will the dinner take place? How will guests be seated? Why? Think of their personalities and decide: What will they wear? What will each of them eat?*
- 10 **Role play:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to act out this conversation after the evening at the theatre.
Student A: *You are Mrs Nickleby. You want Kate to be friendly with Sir Mulberry Hawk. Say why.*
Student B: *You are Kate. You don't want to see that ugly man again. Say why.*

Chapters 7–8

After reading

- 11 **Write:** In class or as homework, get students to write on the following: *You are Smike. You have been kidnapped and you are now locked in a room. You find a piece of paper and you write how you feel, what you are afraid of and what you think will happen to you.*

- 12 **Role play:** Students work in pairs. Ask them to write and act out the conversation the Cheerybles had. *Imagine you are Ned and Charles. Write down the conversation both brothers have and how they decide to give Nicholas a job and a chance in life.* Then ask them to act out their dialogues for the class.

Chapters 9–11

After reading

- 13 **Role play:** Put students into pairs. Ask them to act out this conversation between Madeline and Nicholas.
Student A: *You are Nicholas. Tell Madeline how you feel and what your plans are for you both. Bring her a gift and ask her out on a date.*
Student B: *You are Madeline. You are shy and surprised. Tell Nicholas how you feel.*

Chapters 12–14

After reading

- 14 **Discuss:** Have students talk about Ralph. Put students into groups and tell them to discuss these questions: *How do Snawley, Squeers, Arthur Gride, Brooker and Newman Noggs feel about Ralph? Why? Do you feel sorry for Ralph? Why (not)? Was Nicholas right not to accept Ralph's money?*
- 15 **Write:** Ask students to imagine they are Squeers and to write a letter to Fanny telling her how he feels while he is imprisoned.

After reading

- 16 **Discuss:** Have students talk about poverty. *What view of poverty does Nicholas Nickleby have? What is important about Nicholas's attitude in life?*
- 17 **Discuss:** Watch the ending of the film *Nicholas Nickleby* by Douglas McGrath. *Did you like the ending of the film? Was it close to the ending in the book?* Ask students to compare the characters in the book with those in the film. *Were the characters as you imagined them? Which one would you change? Why?*
- 18 **Project:** Make a film and literature magazine.
- Discuss what its name will be and who the target readers will be. Work on the cover of the magazine.
 - Decide how many sections the magazine will have. Include: a book review and a film review of *Nicholas Nickleby*; information about Dickens; photos or drawings of the author; the film and the book; interviews of characters in the book or film.
 - The class prepares a display with their work. Invite other classes to visit your classroom. Your students can present their work to a real audience.