# *Little Dorrit*

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

***Little Dorrit*** is a [serial novel](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial_%28literature%29) by [Charles Dickens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Dickens) published originally between 1855 and 1857. It is a work of [satire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satire) on the shortcomings of the government and society of the period.

Preceded by [*Hard Times*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hard_Times) Followed by [*A Tale of Two Cities*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Tale_of_Two_Cities)*.*

Much of Dickens' ire is focused upon the institutions of [debtors' prisons](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Debtors%27_prison)—in which people who owed money were imprisoned, unable to work, until they have repaid their debts. The representative prison in this case is the [Marshalsea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshalsea) where the author's own father had been imprisoned.

Most of Dickens' other critiques in this particular novel concern the social safety net: industry, and the treatment and safety of workers; the bureaucracy of the British [Treasury](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HM_Treasury) (as figured in the fictional "[Circumlocution Office](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_19th_century_English_language_idioms#Circumlocution_Office)" [Bk. 1, Ch. 10]); and the separation of people based on the lack of intercourse between the classes.

**Original publication**

*Little Dorrit* was published in 19 monthly instalments, each comprising 32 pages and featuring two illustrations by [Phiz](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hablot_Knight_Browne). Each installment cost a [shilling](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shilling), with the exception of the last, a double issue which cost two shillings.

**Book the First: Poverty**

* I – December 1855 (chapters 1–4)
* II – January 1856 (chapters 5–8)
* III – February 1856 (chapters 9–11)
* IV – March 1856 (chapters 12–14)
* V – April 1856 (chapters 15–18)
* VI – May 1856 (chapters 19–22)
* VII – June 1856 (chapters 23–25)
* VIII – July 1856 (chapters 26–29)
* IX – August 1856 (chapters 30–32)
* X – September 1856 (chapters 33–36)

**Book the Second: Riches**

* XI – October 1856 (chapters 1–4)
* XII – November 1856 (chapters 5–7)
* XIII – December 1856 (chapters 8–11)
* XIV – January 1857 (chapters 12–14)
* XV – February 1857 (chapters 15–18)
* XVI – March 1857 (chapters 19–22)
* XVII – April 1857 (chapters 23–26)
* XVIII – May 1857 (chapters 27–29)
* XIX-XX – June 1857 (chapters 30–34)

**Synopsis**

The novel begins in [Marseille](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marseille) with the notorious murderer Rigaud informing his cellmate that he has murdered his wife. Also in the town is Arthur Clennam, who is returning to London to see his mother following the death of his father, with whom he had lived for twenty years in China. As he died, his father had given Arthur a mysterious watch, murmuring, "Your mother." Naturally Arthur had assumed that it was intended for Mrs. Clennam, whom he and the world supposed to be his mother.

Inside the watch casing was an old silk paper with the initials D N F (Do Not Forget) worked into it in beads. It was a message, but when Arthur shows it to harsh and implacable Mrs. Clennam, a religious fanatic, she refuses to reveal what it means, and the two become estranged.

In London, William Dorrit, imprisoned as a debtor, has been a resident of [Marshalsea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marshalsea) debtor's prison for so long that his three children — snobbish Fanny, idle Edward (known as Tip), and Amy (known as Little Dorrit) — have all grown up there, though they are free to pass in and out of the prison as they please. Amy is devoted to her father and through her sewing, has been financially supporting the two of them.

Once in London, Arthur is reacquainted with his former fiancée Flora Finching, who is now overweight and simpering. Arthur's mother, Mrs. Clennam, although paralysed and a wheelchair user, still runs the family business with the help of her servant Jeremiah Flintwinch and his downtrodden wife Affery. When Arthur learns that Mrs. Clennam has employed Little Dorrit as a seamstress, showing her unusual kindness, he wonders if the young girl might be connected with the mystery of the watch. Suspecting that his mother played a part in the misfortunes of the Dorrits, Arthur follows the girl to the Marshalsea. He vainly tries to inquire about William Dorrit's debt at the poorly run Circumlocution Office and acts as a benefactor to her father and brother. While at the Circumlocution Office, Arthur meets the struggling inventor Daniel Doyce, whom he decides to help by becoming his business partner. The grateful Little Dorrit falls in love with Arthur, much to the dismay of the son of the Marshalsea jailer, John Chivery, who has loved her since childhood; Arthur, however, fails to recognize Amy's interest. At last, aided by the indefatigable debt-collector Pancks, Arthur discovers that William Dorrit is the lost heir to a large fortune and he is finally able to pay his way out of prison.

William Dorrit decides that as a now respectable family they should go on a tour of Europe. They travel over the [Alps](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alps) and take up residence for a time in [Venice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venice), and finally in Rome, carrying, with the exception of Amy, an air of conceit at their new-found wealth. Eventually after a spell of delirium, Mr Dorrit dies in Rome, and his distraught brother Frederick, a kindhearted musician, who has always stood by him, also passes away. Amy is left alone and returns to London to stay with newly married Fanny and her husband, the foppish Edmund Sparkler.

The fraudulent dealings (similar to a [Ponzi scheme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzi_scheme)) of Mr. Merdle who is Edmund Sparkler's stepfather leads to the collapse of Merdle's bank after his suicide, taking with it the savings of both the Dorrits and Arthur Clennam, who is now himself imprisoned in the Marshalsea. While there, he is taken ill and is nursed back to health by Amy. The French villain Rigaud, now in London, discovers that Mrs. Clennam has been hiding the fact that Arthur is not her real son, and Rigaud attempts to blackmail her. Arthur's biological mother was a beautiful young singer with whom his father had gone through a ceremony of sorts before being pressured by his wealthy uncle to marry the present Mrs. Clennam. Mrs. Clennam had agreed to bring up the child on condition that its mother never see him. After Arthur's real mother had died of grief at being separated from her child and its father, the uncle, stung by remorse, had left a bequest to Arthur's biological mother and to "the youngest daughter of her patron", a kindly musician who had taught and befriended her—and who happened to be Amy Dorrit's paternal uncle, Frederick. As Frederick Dorrit had no daughter, the legacy goes to the youngest daughter of Frederick's brother, who is William Dorrit, Amy's father.

Mrs. Clennam has been suppressing her knowledge that Amy is the heiress to an enormous fortune, and estate. Overcome by passion, Mrs. Clennam rises from her chair and totters out of her house to reveal the secret to Amy and to beg her forgiveness, which the kind-hearted girl freely grants. Mrs. Clennam then falls down in the street—never to recover the use of her speech or limbs—as the house of Clennam literally collapses before her eyes, killing Rigaud. Rather than hurt Arthur, Amy chooses not to reveal what she has learned, though this means that she misses her legacy.

When Arthur's business partner Daniel Doyce returns from Russia a wealthy man, Arthur is released and his fortunes revived, and Arthur and Amy are married.

Like many of Dickens novels, *Little Dorrit* contains numerous subplots. One subplot concerns Arthur Clennam's friends, the kindhearted Meagles. They are upset when their daughter Pet marries an artist called Gowan and when their servant and foster daughter Tattycoram is lured away from them to the sinister Miss Wade, an acquaintance of the criminal Rigaud. Miss Wade hates men, and it turns out she is the jilted sweetheart of Gowan.

**Literary significance and reception**

Like much of Dickens' late fiction, this novel has seen many reversals of critical fortune. It has been shown to be a critique of [HM Treasury](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HM_Treasury) and the blunders that led to the loss of life for 360 British soldiers at the [Battle of Balaclava](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Balaclava).[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Dorrit#cite_note-0)

**Adaptations**

*Little Dorrit* has been adapted for the screen five times. The first three were produced in 1913, 1920 and 1934. The 1934 German-language adaptation "Klein Dorrit" starred [Anny Ondra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anny_Ondra) as Little Dorrit and [Mathias Wieman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mathias_Wieman) as Arthur Clennam. It was directed by [Karel Lamač](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karel_Lama%C4%8D).[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Dorrit#cite_note-1) The fourth, in 1988, is [*Little Dorrit*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Dorrit_%28film%29), a UK feature film starring [Alec Guinness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alec_Guinness) and [Derek Jacobi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Derek_Jacobi) amongst a large cast of over 300 British actors directed by [Christine Edzard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christine_Edzard).

The fifth adaptation is a TV series co-produced by the [BBC](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Television) and [WGBH Boston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WGBH-TV), [*Little Dorrit*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Dorrit_%28TV_serial%29), written by [Andrew Davies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andrew_Davies_%28writer%29), and featuring [Claire Foy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Claire_Foy), [Freema Agyeman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freema_Agyeman), [Bill Paterson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Paterson_%28actor%29), [Andy Serkis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andy_Serkis), [Matthew Macfadyen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Macfadyen), [Tom Courtenay](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tom_Courtenay), [Judy Parfitt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Judy_Parfitt), [Russell Tovey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russell_Tovey), [Janine Duvitski](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janine_Duvitski), [James Fleet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Fleet), [Ruth Jones](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruth_Jones), [Eve Myles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eve_Myles), [Mackenzie Crook](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mackenzie_Crook), [Stephane Cornicard](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephane_Cornicard), [Anton Lesser](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Lesser), [Alun Armstrong](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alun_Armstrong_%28actor%29), [Sue Johnston](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sue_Johnston), [Emma Pierson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Pierson) and [Amanda Redman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amanda_Redman). The series aired between October and December 2008 in the U.K. It then aired in America on [PBS](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PBS)'s [*Masterpiece*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masterpiece_%28TV_series%29) in April 2009. The series was broadcast in Australia, on ABC1 TV, in June and July 2010.

**References**

1. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Dorrit#cite_ref-0) Philpotts, Trey. "Trevelyan, Treasury, and Circumlocution." *Dickens Studies Annual.* **22**, 1993, 283–302.
2. [**^**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Dorrit#cite_ref-1) [*New York Times* Movie Review, 19 October 1935.](http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9406E3D81238E13ABC4152DFB667838E629EDE)