

Great Ambitions Short Guide

Great Ambitions by Elisabeth Kyle (Agnes Mary Robertson Dunlop)

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Overview

Great Ambitions: A Story of the Early Years of Charles Dickens provides young adults with an interesting and wellwritten account of Charles Dickens's life, beginning when he is twelve years old and working in a blacking factory and ending when he is twenty-seven, married, a father, and a successful writer. While the details apply to Dickens's own life, they also become universal in that he experiences typical adolescent disappointments, romances, failures, ambitions, and successes. Determined to better himself, when he is not working as a reporter for the London Chronicle, he spends his time reading and studying in the British Museum, and when he decides to become a court reporter, he spends long hours mastering the difficult court shorthand.

Great Ambitions also examines how Dickens's experiences affect him as a writer. All writers are influenced by the world in which they live, and Dickens is no exception. Kyle not only takes the reader through the London streets with Dickens, but she also selects and unravels those interesting details and characters that Dickens would use when he began writing fiction. For example, in *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* he incorporates material from his trips into London's slums and night world with Inspector Field. To appreciate how Dickens selected his fictional material and to gain an insight into his literary world, a world that people still describe as "Dickensian," Kyle's *Great Ambitions* is a must for the young adult reader.

About the Author

Elisabeth Kyle was born Agnes Mary Robertson Dunlop in Ayr, Scotland, to James and Elizabeth Riddle Dunlop.

Her father was a lawyer who worked for the family law firm, but he preferred literature to legal pursuits. He often paraphrased the classics for his daughter while suppressing those books that he felt were either poorly written or undesirable for children. Although he died when she was only nine, Kyle's father undoubtedly influenced her later life. Kyle revealed that she often told stories just to pass the time, but as a child had no real desire to become a writer. When an editor friend encouraged her to try, she began writing children's stories for annuals, which is, ironically, how Charles Dickens began his writing career.

According to Kyle, however, she was sidetracked when she became a journalist for the Manchester Guardian and the Glasgow Herald. She says that newspaper writing was "useful discipline" because she learned how to use "the blue pencil and not resent others doing so"; the "blue pencil" refers to criticism and editing. Between World War I and World War II, she traveled extensively in Central and Eastern Europe as a correspondent for the Manchester Guardian and the Glasgow Herald, and she acknowledged that one or two of the adventures that she records in her novels actually happened.

Because there was a dearth of adventure books for young adult readers, a British publisher requested that she write that type of book. In choosing and dealing with her subject matter, Kyle stated that she learned a valuable lesson; the settings must contain real scenes that she remembered and the children in her books must be deftly drawn. She noted that in writing books for young adult readers, she was also practicing for writing suspense novels because she always considered herself a "story-teller first and foremost." Attesting to the popularity of her books and their subject matter is the fact that they have been published in both the United States and England, and that adaptations of them have been broadcast on the British Broadcasting System's Scottish "Children's Hour." Kyle died on February 23, 1982.

Setting

The setting for *Great Ambitions* is Dickens's London, with its cross section of society, streets, shops, theaters, schools, and famous landmarks such as Covent Garden, the Inns of Court, the Houses of Parliament, and St. Paul's Cathedral. Kyle vividly portrays England's seasons, especially winter, the season that Dickens describes so well and that has become associated with his *Christmas Carol*. Three different monarchs rule England during the span of years in *Great Ambitions*, 1824-1839: King George IV, King William IV, and Queen Victoria, who was eighteen years old when she was crowned and from whose reign came the term "Victorian England." During these years occur various changes significant to English history, including the coming of the railways, the House of Commons fire, the increasing popularity of newspapers, and a heightened awareness of the plight of the poor. Within this historical context, the reader sees how Dickens develops as a writer who begins his career with the humorous *Sketches by Boz*, which appear serially in *London's Monthly Magazine*, and progresses to the *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield*, novels that combine comedy and tragedy.

Social Sensitivity

Great Ambitions does not directly tackle any social issues, but it does note social problems that influence Dickens's life and writing. Dickens is appalled by the treatment of London's poor that he witnesses firsthand on his tours with Inspector Field into the slums. Another social condition that concerns Dickens is the degrading fraud of boys' academies and boarding schools in which students are abused—the most scathing indictment of this problem appears in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Other social issues that indirectly appear in *Great Ambitions* will later be dealt with in Dickens's novels: poor boys being taught to steal in *Oliver Twist*; London's slum orphans and the insensitive bureaucracy of the law courts in *Bleak House*; and strikes and labor unions in *Hard Times*.



Literary Qualities

Great Ambitions falls into the tradition of the literary biography. Because she cannot address all the aspects of Dickens's early years and keep her book at a manageable length, Kyle carefully selects those details that shed the most light on his life, career, and literature.

His job in the blacking factory, his father's confinement in Marshalsea Prison, his interest in acting and the stage, his court reporting career, and his journeys through the London streets all shape Dickens as a man and a writer.

Kyle's selectivity results in an interesting and comprehensive study of Charles Dickens's background.

Kyle creates a suspenseful narrative that keeps the reader interested in what will happen next. Charles hates his father's confinement in debtor's prison, and the third chapter ends when he meets and escorts a stranger who is going to Marshalsea to pay for the release of a mysterious prisoner. In the next chapter, the prisoner turns out to be Dickens's father. Besides ending some chapters at a climactic moment, Kyle also foreshadows some events. At the end of the fifth chapter, for example, Charles tells his father, "I want to be a great actor," and indeed this foreshadows his years of work with the theater and also his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*. Another example of foreshadowing occurs when Charles tells his sister that he will never forget Marshalsea, suggesting both his eventual use of a debtor's prison in *David Copperfield* and his desire to become successful and to help his parents. The most interesting use of foreshadowing involves the people and events Dickens notes on his walks through London; they appear again at the end of the book as Kyle relates them to his famous novels.



Themes and Characters

Using a third-person narrator, *Great Ambitions* accurately captures Charles Dickens's thoughts and experiences as he grows into manhood. Because his father is imprisoned in Marshalsea for bad debts and because he himself earns little money at the blacking factory, the young Dickens entertains himself by watching and imitating the people he passes on the London streets. In a ragsto-riches success story, Dickens rises far above his humble beginnings, and his story becomes universal—a testament to the individual's ability to succeed through sheer determination and perseverance.

Dickens's immediate family plays an important role in the biography. He models Wilkins Micawber in *David Copperfield* after his father, John Dickens.

In fact, Mr. Micawber's famous and often quoted advice is actually Dickens's father's line: "Yearly income, twenty pounds. Yearly expenditure nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings, and six pence. Result, happiness. Yearly expenditure, twenty pounds, six pence.

Result, misery." Dickens publishes his first sketches under the pseudonym "Boz," his younger brother's nickname.

Dickens's favorite nephew, the crippled son of his sister Franny, becomes the model for Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*.

Another major character in Dickens's early life is Maria Beadnell, with whom he falls in love. At times, Maria displays warmth and affection, but at other times she is distant and flirtatious. In fact, her brother-in-law John Kolle tells young Dickens that Maria is just a coquette.

Dickens eventually realizes that Kolle is right and ends his relationship with Maria. Like many others in his life, Maria becomes the basis for Dickens's fictional characters. While she provides the haughtiness for Estella in *Great Expectations*, she more closely parallels Dora Spenlow in *David Copperfield*.

Dora is flighty and even has a dog over which she fawns, just as Maria fawns over her dog Daphne. Beyond serving as a model for Dora, Maria typifies the first love in every young person's life, a love that may be painful but also an experience through which the person matures.

Great Ambitions also portrays a number of historical figures, including George Hogarth, a newspaper editor and father of Dickens's wife, Catherine; George Cruikshank, the illustrator for *Sketches by Boz*; Hablot Browne, the *Pickwick Papers* illustrator who used the pseudonym "Phiz"; Captain Holland, the editor of the *Monthly Magazine*; John Henry Skelton, the model for Mr. Turveydrop in *Bleak House*; and Charles Kemble, one of England's most famous comic actors. Other figures also inspire Dickens characters: the Watercress Girl is the model for Florence Dombey in *Dombey and Sons*; the window



washer at Shaw's Academy becomes Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*; and the forgotten Bastille prisoner inspires Dr. Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Like other Dickens characters, these contribute to the strong sense of place evident in his work, and they illustrate how he translates fact into fiction through the magic of his imagination.

The major theme of *Great Ambitions* is education as detailed in the "education novel" form of the late eighteenth century. The "education novel" presented in fiction a guide for educating young people so that they would grow up to be morally and intellectually sound and independent. Novels such as Thomas Day's *Sanford and Merton* (1783-1789) and Elizabeth Inchbald's *Simple Story* (1791) emphasized education as a process that makes youngsters into self-reliant adults. Kyle concentrates on the process through which Dickens becomes an intellectually self-reliant person as he grows and matures from a twelve-year-old boy to a successful writer. Dickens learns, for example, that first loves are part of life, that he owes certain responsibilities to his parents and family, and that if he wants to be successful, he must persevere.



Topics for Discussion

1. Point out at least two instances in *Great Expectations* that show Dickens's ability to mimic and imitate people. How does this ability relate to Dickens's life and writing?
 2. Point out several instances in which Dickens works hard to educate himself.
 3. Point out several instances in which Pip shows just how infatuated Dickens was with Estella. Point out several instances that reveal Estella's coquetry.
 4. Does Dickens do the honorable thing in ending his relationship with Estella?
 5. Towards the end of *Great Expectations*, Dickens feels sorry for his crippled nephew. What is significant about Dickens's comment that in one of his stories the crippled boy will get well? To what work is he referring?
 6. Pip is adept at describing London's slums. Pick out several passages in which she captures the reader's imagination with her description.
 7. When *Great Expectations* ends, Dickens and his family are moving from Ragged Street to a larger, finer house on Devonshire Terrace. Why does Dickens end the narrative here? Is it an effective place to end?
 8. The title of *Great Expectations* in England was *The Boy Who Asked for More: The Early Life of Charles Dickens*.
- How do both the English and the American titles relate to Dickens's life and literature?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. After some research, write a report about one of the historical figures or places portrayed in *Great Expectations*, such as the artist George Cruikshank, the artist Hablot Browne, or the Marshalsea Prison.
2. Prepare a brief report about Charles Dickens and his interest in the London stage.
3. Kyle's *Great Expectations* ends when Dickens is twenty-seven years old. Research and report on some of the events in Dickens's later life.
4. Some critics believe that *David Copperfield* is the most autobiographical of Dickens's novels. After reading *David Copperfield*, discuss at least three autobiographical elements in the novel by commenting on both the similarities and differences between the autobiographical and the fictional details.
5. Explain the techniques that Kyle uses at the end of *Great Expectations* to indicate what lies in Dickens's future.

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