Name:

Directions: Read the following biography of Charles Dickens. Answer the questions that follow.

**Charles Dickens: The Early Years**

British novelist Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, England. He was the second of eight children. Despite his parents’ best efforts, the family remained poor. In 1822, the Dickens family moved to Camden Town, a poor neighborhood in London. By that time, the family’s financial situation had grown dire (desperate), as his father, John Dickens, had a dangerous habit of living beyond the family’s means. Eventually, he was sent to prison for debt in 1824, when Charles was just 12 years old.

Following his father’s imprisonment, Charles Dickens was forced to leave school to work at a boot factory alongside the River Thames. It was the best he could do to help support his family. He felt abandoned and betrayed by the adults who were supposed to take care of him.

Much to his relief, Dickens was permitted to go back to school when his father received a family inheritance and used it to pay off his debts. But when Dickens was 15, his education was pulled out from under him once again. In 1827, he had to drop out of school and work as an office boy to contribute to his family’s income. As it turned out, the job became an early launching point for his writing career.

Within a year of being hired, Dickens began freelance reporting at the law courts of London. Just a few years later, he was reporting for two major magazines and newspapers under the pseudonym (fake name) “Boz.” In 1836, his success caught the eye of Catherine Hogarth, whom he soon married. Catherine would grace Charles with a brood of 10 children before the couple separated in 1858.

In 1836, the same year that *Sketches by Boz* was release, Dickens started publishing *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. His series of sketches, originally written as captions for another artist, took the form of monthly serial installments. *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* was wildly popular with readers. In fact, Dickens’s sketches were even more popular than the illustrations they were meant to accompany.

Around this time, Dickens had also become publisher of a magazine called *Bentley’s Miscellany*. In it he started publishing his first novel, *Oliver Twist*, which follows the life of an orphan living in the streets of London. The story was inspired by how Dickens felt as an impoverished child forced to get by on his wits (intelligence) and earn his own keep. Dickens continued showcasing *Oliver Twist* in the magazines he later edited. The novel was extremely well received in both England and America. Dedicated readers of *Oliver Twist* eagerly anticipated the next monthly installment.

**Charles Dickens: The Later Years**

Over the next few years, Dickens struggled to match the level of *Oliver Twist’s* success. From 1838-1841, he published three more works.

In 1842, Dickens and his wife, Catherine, Embarked on a five-month lecture tour of the United States, leaving their 10 children at home, in the care of friends. Upon their return, Dickens wrote, *American Notes for Genera Circulation*, a sarcastic piece which criticized American culture and its materialism. In 1843, Dickens wrote his novel, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, a story about a man’s struggle to survive on the ruthless American frontier.

Over the next couple of years, Dickens published two Christmas stories. One was the classic, *A Christmas Carol*, which features the timeless protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge, a curmudgeonly old miser, who, with the help of a ghost, finds the Christmas spirit.

During his first tour to the United States, in 1842, Dickens designated himself as what many have deemed the first modern celebrity. His lectures, which began in Virginia and ended in Missouri, were so widely attended that ticket scalpers started gathering outside his events. Dickens “had the greatest welcome that probably any visitor to America has ever had.”

In light of his criticism of the American people during his first tour, Dickens launched a second U.S. tour, from 1867-1868, hoping to set things right with the public. One this second tour, he made a charismatic speech promising to praise the United States. His 76 reading earned him no less than $95,000, which in the Victorian era, amounted to approximately $1.5 million in current U. S. dollars.

Back at home, Dickens had become so famous that people began to recognize him all over London as he strolled around the city that would serve as his inspiration for future work.

From 1849-1851, Dickens worked on the novel, *David Copperfield*, the first work of its kind; no one had ever written a novel that followed a character through his everyday life. In writing it, Dickens tapped into his own personal experiences, from his difficult childhood to his work as a journalist. Although David Copperfield is not considered Dickens’s best work, it was his personal favorite.

During the 1850s, Dickens suffered two devastating losses: the deaths of his daughter and his father. He also separated from his wife during this time. Consequently, his novels began to express his darkened world view.

Coming out of this “dark novel” time, in 1859 Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel that takes place during the French Revolution. He published it in a magazine he created. His next novel, *Great Expectations*, focuses on the protagonist’s lifelong journey of human development.

In 1865, Dickens was in a train accident and never fully recovered. Despite his fragile condition, he continued to tour until 1870. On June 9, 1870, Dickens had a stroke and, at age 58, died in Kent, England. He was buried in Westminster Abbey, with thousands of mourners gathering at the beloved author’s gravesite. One writer described Dickens’s passing as “an event worldwide, a unique of talents suddenly extinct.” At the time of Dickens’s death, his final novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, was left unfinished. Over the course of his writing careen, Dickens left us with the beloved classic novels: *Oliver Twist, A Christmas Carol, David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cites, and Great Expectations.*

**Biography Questions**

**The Early Years**

1. When and where was Charles Dickens born?

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1. Why was Dickens’s father imprisoned?

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1. What kind of work did Dickens do to help support his family while his father was in jail? How did he feel about having to do this?

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1. At age 15, what kind of work was Dickens doing? How did this help him choose his “real” career?

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1. What was one of Dickens’s most important qualities, which helped him to survive his difficult childhood?

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1. The biography states that Dickens needed to “earn his own keep.” What is the meaning of this phrase?

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**The Later Years**

1. What did Dickens and his wife do in 1842?

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1. What are TWO ways it can be proven that Dickens was a successful/popular writer?

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1. What seems to have been very influential in Dickens’s life (it was part of more than one piece of his writing)?

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1. What made the 1850s a particularly difficult time period for Dickens?

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1. Which work was Dickens’s personal favorite?

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