

# Little Dorrit

Although *Little Dorrit* is considered one of Charles Dickens's "social novels" (meant to galvanize social reform), many of the societal failings it criticizes had already been reformed by the time Dickens first published the novel in serial form from 1855 to 1857. Most notably, *Little Dorrit* exposes how detrimental English debtors' prisons proved to be for the families who were sent to live there indefinitely; however, such prisons had been abolished even before Dickens first began to write the story of "little" Amy Dorrit (who was born and raised in the confines of the famous Marshalsea debtors' prison).

Perhaps Dickens wrote *Little Dorrit* as a way to reflect on his own family's experiences in debtors' prison and to convey the complexity of people's relationships to money. In fact, one of the most significant messages of the novel seems to be that money—the key to escaping debtors' prison—does not magically lead characters to escape their own neuroses. Clearly, money seems to have its own imprisoning power.

## Discussion Questions

1. **NOVEL TO FILM:** Chapter 10 of *Little Dorrit* ("Containing the Whole Science of Government") focuses on the Circumlocution Office, a fictional governmental agency Dickens created to satirize the corruption and inefficiencies he recognized in his own government. Read the first seven paragraphs of the chapter (also available at [Literature Classics.com](http://LiteratureClassics.com).) Discuss how the extended metaphor of the Circumlocution Office is visually represented in the film. How can you relate Dickens' perception of bureaucracy to your own experiences with the DMV, the IRS, or any other governmental agency?
2. The theme of filial duty (loyalty to one's parents) runs throughout *Little Dorrit*. Which characters in *Little Dorrit* fulfill their sense of filial duty and which characters defy that role? Do you believe that the concept of filial duty still exists in the same way today as it did in Dickens' day, or does each culture or generation set a different standard?
3. The characters of Mrs. Merdle and Mrs. General are often seen in *Little Dorrit* as authorities on the subject of Society. What do you think Dickens means by his use of the word "Society"? Which characters in *Little Dorrit* seem to represent or speak for Society and which characters are excluded from such a distinction? What does it mean to live outside of Society? How does Dickens blur or undermine these distinctions in *Little Dorrit*? Do you feel that society today is as impenetrable as it was in the 19th century?

4. Does economics or convenience drive each marriage in *Little Dorrit*? Would Arthur have ended up with Amy if he had *not* fallen into debt? Does Dickens ever allow romantic love to triumph in the novel?
5. In A. S. Byatt's article about *Little Dorrit* (available at [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/nov/15/little-dorritt-byatt](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/nov/15/little-dorritt-byatt)), she claims that the story makes "the financier the antichrist." Do you agree with Byatt's assertion? How does it play out in *Little Dorrit* and how could it apply to the current economic environment?
6. When Rigaud visits the house of Mrs. Clennams using the alias "Blandois," he is struck by Mr. Flintwinch's comment, "There are secrets in all families." What secrets are the principal families in *Little Dorrit* concealing and how are they finally revealed? How does trying to keep this information secret affect the family members' lives and relationships? When, if ever, do you think it is right for families to keep secrets?

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