Recovery heroes from the past: Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times it was the worst of times,” (Dickens, 2003).

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Recovery heroes from the past: Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times it was the worst of times,” (Dickens, 2003).

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Abstract.

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a profile of the novelist Charles Dickens.

Design/methodology/approach – Several biographies and articles about the life of Charles Dickens were examined, to see if there was evidence that he experienced mental health problems.

Findings – While Dickens has been acclaimed for his ability to authentically portray the living conditions of the poor in nineteenth century Britain, there is comparatively little historical record of the fact that he may have experienced bipolar disorder. This paper suggests that he displayed many of the characteristic symptoms of bipolar.

Research limitations/implications – The story of Dickens' own childhood is an amazing example of personal resilience. It no doubt enhanced the quality of his writing, but it may also have "sown the seeds" of a later mental illness.

Practical implications – So much attention has been focussed on the colourful characters from Dickens' novels, but little on the problems of the man himself.

Social implications – The story of Charles Dickens is as fascinating as any of the fictional characters he created, if not even more intriguing. His story confirms the link between writers, creativity and mood disorders.
Originality/value – Given the huge attention and worldwide acclaim paid to the books of Charles Dickens, which have inspired numerous films as well as musicals, it is surprising how little attention has been paid to the author himself and his struggles with mental illness.

Keywords Dickens Bipolar Creativity PTSD Recovery hero

Introduction.

Charles Dickens is considered to be the greatest 19th Century English novelist and was one of the most prolific writers of the era. He wrote 15 highly acclaimed novels and produced a vast number of works in other genres. The fictional characters he created, often grotesque and comic, are amongst some of the World’s best known such as Scrooge, Oliver Twist, and David Copperfield to name but a few. Just his surname alone, immediately brings to mind images of Victorian England. He enjoyed a relatively early success and had an unprecedented popularity during his lifetime. By his early 30’s he was the most famous writer of the English language of his age (Johnson, 1952). He excelled in portraying contemporary London and concerned himself with many social issues and reform, and promoting the careers of other novelists through his weekly journals. By the Twentieth Century he had been recognised by scholars and critics alike as a literary genius. Dickens is as famous today as he was in his own lifetime. His novels and short stories have endured a lasting popularity and are a continuing inspiration for TV, literature, art and academia. The passion and drive that Dickens displayed at times throughout his life
and the ferocity he showed with everything he undertook along with his immense productivity have led some to believe that he may have suffered from bipolar disorder. Unlike other famous people of his era, Lincoln, Darwin and Nightingale, his mental health problems have received comparatively little scrutiny.

**Upbringing and Early Life.**

The humble beginnings of Charles John Huffam Dickens began in Mile End Terrace, Portsmouth on the 7th of February, 1912. He was the second of eight children born to John and Elizabeth Dickens. His father, John Dickens was a navy pay clerk and had a tendency to live beyond his financial means. Charles’ education was very limited and he was mostly self-taught, yet he still possessed the genius to become the greatest writer of his age. As a child he was “a very little and sickly boy....the circumstance of his weak health having strongly inclined him to reading” (an extract from “The Life of Charles Dickens” by John Forster (2011, p.831.) It developed in him a desire for knowledge. He spent approximately one year at William Giles School in Chatham, Kent, until his father was recalled to Somerset House. Being taken away from the school and living in struggling poverty with his family, was a very bitter period for Dickens. However worse was to come when his father was arrested for bad debt and sent to the Marshalsea Debtors Prison in Southwark along with the rest of the family, other than Charles, who was found lodgings in a boarding house and his older sister Fanny, who was able to attend the Royal College of Music.

Charles was now living alone and was forced to find work in Warren’s Blacking Warehouse, in order to help support his impoverished family. The sensitive 11 year
old boy was undeniably traumatised by these events of his youth. He later said of this episode of his life ... “I do not write resentfully or angrily for I know how all these things have worked together to make me what I am: but I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget....” (Johnson, 1952 p.40). Up until this point he had sincerely believed that his destiny had been for him to become a gentleman, yet here he was suffering the humiliation of pasting pots of boot polish with labels. The fact that his sister was able to continue with the education that Dickens had believed ought to have been his entitlement, only served to exacerbate the torment he was enduring. The ordeal was said to have stayed with him for the rest of his life and influenced his views on social reform. The experience was later thinly veiled in many of his writings. His father, John Dickens, was the inspiration for the character of Mr Macawber, the protagonist in the most autobiographical novel David Copperfield and the image of the debtor's prison appears in several of his novels.

Even after his father had secured his release from the Marshalsea via a legacy, Charles was forced to continue working at the factory by his mother, who was concerned about money. This was an act Dickens was never able to forgive his mother for. In 1825, due to his father's social ambitions, he was allowed to leave the factory and able to return to school for a further two years at Wellington House Academy. In 1827, at the age of fifteen, Charles left education and became a lawyer's clerk (the law features heavily in many of his novels). The following year he decided to better himself by becoming a parliamentary reporter earning a salary many times that of his legal pay.
**Career and Personal Life.**

When Dickens was around 18 years old he had his first romantic encounter when he fell in love with Maria Beadnell. This was however to turn out to be unrequited, as due to her parents’ disapproval, Maria rejected Dickens. He believed at the time that no-one had ever suffered love the way he had and he later put the blame for this experience on his habit of concealing his emotions. The experience, he said years later “made so deep an impression on me that I refer to it a habit of suppression which now belongs to me...” (Johnson, 1952, p.66). When years later he met Maria Beadnell again, he remarked that he was cruelly disappointed and wondered what he had ever seen in her.

Dickens' first published work was *Dinner at Poplar Walk* in 1833. This was an immediate success. The following year he was working as a reporter at the Morning Chronicle and started writing *Sketches by Boz*. In 1836, the first instalment of the *Pickwick Papers* was published (his first major novel) and the same year he married Catherine Hogarth. The initial happiness of the Dickens household however was soon shattered as Catherine’s sister Mary, was to die, quite suddenly in 1837. He had become extremely attached to his young sister-in-law and the length of time his grief lasted and the power of it was astonishing, according to Slater (2009). He found himself unable to write, and the instalments of the *Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist* that he had been currently working on, failed to appear on time, this was the first and only time he missed his deadlines throughout his career.
Dickens rapidly became the celebrity of his era and soon became a household name, however he was always very private about his personal life. Dickens was a complex man. He had an extremely intelligent and observant nature with a great aptitude for mimicry, that he used to great effect in his amateur theatricals and later in life, and in the public readings he gave of excerpts from his novels. He had an obsession for cleanliness and order and was fascinated by disorder. He made many visits to prisons, poorhouses and asylums both in London and on his travels abroad. He had a boundless energy and was almost constantly in a state of restlessness. He had an enormous capacity for work, grinding out a major novel whilst editing a magazine, organising a play production and with much travelling throughout the country and abroad. ‘This pursuit of various goals was so energetic, and he demonstrated such an ability to do many different things at once and fast, that even his search for a career had an aspect of genius,’ according to Tomalin (2011, p. 50). He soon earned the nickname of Inimitable and was described by the Scottish philosopher and close friend, Thomas Carlyle, as ‘a unique of talents’.

Amongst his many characteristics was his generosity and sense of injustice for the poor, downtrodden and neglected. He financially supported his large and extended family, however at times grudgingly due to certain members’ lack of responsibility with money matters. He had a genuine concern for the oppressed and lowest of society, perhaps due to the experiences of his youth. He was a champion of education for the lower classes, improvements in factory wages and working conditions, progress for sanitation, child labour laws, penitentiary reform and social benefits for fallen women. Karl Marx reportedly said to Engels that he ‘issued to the
world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together,' (Ackroyd, 1990, p.380). His many charitable works included, raising funds for impoverished writers and the children's hospital, Great Ormond Street. He advised a Miss Coutts on good works such as “ragged schools” and having proposed a home for homeless (*fallen*) women i.e. Urania Cottage, he helped to organise and administrate it and took a close interest in the establishment for over a decade of his life.

“For it was suffering and the memory of his sufferings which had given him the powerful sympathy of the great writer, just as his recollection of those harder days inspired him with pity for the poor and the dispossessed which was a mark of his social writings,” Ackroyd (1990, p.307.)

Charles fathered 10 children with his wife Catherine, but they were to separate in 1958 after over 20 years of marriage. She was persuaded to leave the marital home and Dickens was said to have never set eyes on her again for the remainder of his life. It was around this period that he was alleged to have had an affair with a young actress named Ellen ‘Nelly’ Ternan, with whom he may or may not have had another child. He was travelling with her and her mother when he was involved in the Staplehurst rail crash in 1865. Dickens tended the victims of the derailment, some of whom died whilst in his care and the experience went on to have a great effect on him. “…I have sudden vague rushes of terror, even when riding in a hansom cab, which are perfectly unreasonable but quite surmountable,” (Ackroyd, 1990, p. 457) he later reported. Ellen Ternan remained a close acquaintance of his, until his death.
During his later years Dickens’ prolific writing virtually ceased so that he could concentrate on a second career as a public reader. He made several tours throughout the country and made a tour of America where he was idolised. His health by now was beginning to decline both physically and mentally. He was no longer able to continue with his long walks that he felt soothed his state of mind and suffered greatly from insomnia. He made his final farewell reading tour of England in late 1869 and early 1870, despite being advised against it by doctors, family and friends. He needed the thrill and excitement he received from the reaction of his audiences. His daughter, Kate Dickens (Perugini) said...

“There had never been a way of stopping him from working. To warn or advise him was as idle as stretching one’s hands to a river and bidding it to cease to flow,” (Ackroyd, 2004)

Despite his failing health Dickens maintained his hectic lifestyle and packed his last days with business meetings, family matters, readings and office work concerning his magazine, All the Year Round and he was still writing what was to be his unfinished novel The Mystery of Edwin Drood. He did not stop until the day he fell unconscious having suffered a stroke. He died at his home Gad’s Hill Place on 9th June 1870 and was buried (against his wishes) in Poet’s Corner at Westminster Abbey, where thousands of mourners gathered at his gravesite. His epitaph reads ‘to the memory of Charles Dickens (England’s most popular author)...He was a sympathiser with the poor, the suffering and the oppressed and by his death, one of England’s greatest writers is lost to the world.’
“His triumph over such early sufferings certainly made him the hero of his own life...After his death he held a very special place –unique in fact, among great writers of the century...as not only a great writer indeed but also a great and good man,” (Slater, 2009, p.622).

**Mental Illness Aspects**

Many studies have suggested that creative individuals have an unusually high number of mood disorders and mental health issues are not uncommon in those considered to be creative geniuses according to Pickering (1974). Carson and Wakely (2013) have previously stated that “A theory of creative malady is well known in its application to those in the creative arts”. However in Dickens’ case there is little formal academic literature to be found concerning his specific mental state, although there has been the suggestion that he did indeed suffer from some form of mental health problem (Post 1996; Hershman & Lieb, 1998). Dickens is listed as being one of the *eminent* writers to suffer from bipolar disorder by Foregard (2008).

Although Dickens may never have been formally diagnosed and also it may be difficult to state emphatically the true nature of his particular mental health issues, due to the historical period in which he lived. During his lifetime psychiatry was still in its infancy and Kraepelin had yet to publish the first recognised text book on the subject. Therefore most of the evidence of mental illness is anecdotal. However due to the vast amount of writing Dickens produced for his family and friends, much can be gleaned about his character and state of mind. The mental crises he would endure throughout his life are charted in his letters, in particular those to his close
friend and biographer John Forster. He clearly displayed many of the characteristic symptoms of hypomania as suggested in DSM V (APA, 2013) that would be used to make a diagnosis if he was living in today’s society.

Dickens would often get himself into states of restlessness whilst writing. ‘I cannot relieve my mind or prepare myself …..nothing but the open air will set me right.’ He suffered severely from insomnia, and was addicted to night walks particularly when under stress. Slater wrote ‘He turned out of bed at 2.00am and walked thirty miles through “the dead night” down to his home at Gad’s Hill’ from London. Dickens wrote to a friend whilst writing A Christmas Carol that he had ‘wept and laughed, and wept again, and excited himself in a most extraordinary manner … walking about the back streets of London, fifteen and twenty miles, many a night….’ He told Forster how his emotional distress was inevitably intensified because he was an artist, a writer, and thus fated to lead that ‘so happy yet unhappy existence which seeks its reality in unrealities.’ On another occasion he tells Forster of how he was experiencing ‘symptoms of “extreme depression of mind and a disposition to shed tears from morning till night….’ according to Ackroyd (1990, p.317.).He wrote to another acquaintance of how whilst writing Little Dorrit he felt so ‘steeped in my story’ he found himself ‘alternating between enthusiasm and depression,’ (Dickens; 2008).

The numerous biographies of Charles Dickens all highlight his exuberant and formidable character and the 2013 film The Invisible Woman, about his romantic relationship with the young actress Nelly Ternan, depicts him as a man who does at times display obvious hypomanic characteristics (Tana and Fiennes, 2013). If this is
a true representation of Dickens, then it reflects the portrait of a man with an incredible thirst for life, packing an inexhaustible amount of activity into it. He had a characteristic energy and intensity whilst writing his novels, articles and letters, concerning himself with charitable works, organising his extremely large family, taking control of all aspects of the production of amateur theatricals from writing to performing in plays, and still managing to walk for miles, all at times within a single day. It also shows the irrational aspects that Dickens was capable of. For example the humiliation of his wife Catherine, by having the marital bedroom divided in two, out of the blue, and without warning, after 20 years of marriage. He then publicly announced their separation in a national newspaper. It also displays his capacity for violent actions, like the burning of many of his letters.

Dickens had extremes of character. Edgar Johnson wrote of Dickens that ‘linked with this overbearing and domineering tendency was an excessive vulnerability to psychological pain. In society it rendered him on occasions, shrinking and oversensitive and at others, truculently assertive of his independence’ (Johnson, 1952, p.65). Johnson tells of one commentator, Eleanor Picken, who wrote of how she ‘was horribly frightened by him and at the same time half bewitched …’ ‘Dickens seemed suddenly to be possessed with the demon of mischief,’ and that she was not the only one who was afraid of Dickens. His whole family he noted, held him in awe and were appreciably subdued in his presence, as if they feared to arouse his wrath (Johnson, 1952, p. 193).
The incident in his later life, when he was involved a train disaster, is said to have left him suffering with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “I have sudden vague rushes of terror, even when riding in a hansom cab, which are perfectly unreasonable but quite insurmountable.” Following the Staplehurst rail crash ‘Dickens emphasised that it was the horror of the scenes he experienced following the accident, rather than the accident itself that had really shaken him,’ according to Slater. Regardless of failing physical and mental health throughout his later life he was still constantly driven to work despite being warned against it. His farewell reading tour was eventually cut short when he collapsed on stage during a performance in Bolton in April 1869. He was then forced to return to his home at Gad’s Hill where he resumed work on his novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which he was to leave unfinished, dying in June 1870 of a stroke.

**Appraisal as recovery hero**

Charles Dickens certainly seems to have displayed many of the hypomanic behaviours that are characteristic of sufferers of bipolar disorder and it may have been this that enabled him to be such a prolific and creative writer (he was often known to be writing two novels simultaneously). Manic periods were followed by episodes of depression, the symptoms of which for him were insomnia, extreme fatigue, loss of interest in usual activities and a diminished ability to concentrate (Spitzer et al., 1978). Dickens certainly seems to have experienced these symptoms and as mentioned above, one of his habits was to walk the streets of London at night. However despite or because of his mental illness he was not prevented from becoming a great writer and he used his traumatic childhood experiences in his
works of fiction. Many of his novels show his keen interest in mental health problems (Brain, 1955) and other researchers have looked at Dickens’ writings as sources of information on mental health, for example Douglas (2008). However for some unknown reason, researchers have looked much less at Dickens’ own mental health problems. Other contemporaries attracted more attention from mental health researchers, such as Florence Nightingale (Wisner et al, 2005), Charles Darwin (Hubble, 1943; 1953) and Abraham Lincoln (Burlingame, 1997; Shenk, 2006).

There is of course a long association between writers and mood disorders, starting even before Nancy Andreasen’s seminal work on the Iowa Writers Workshop (Andreasen, 1987), to later reviews of the field by Post (1996) and Foregeard (2008). There is no doubt that periods of hypomania are associated with enhanced levels of creativity and that periods of depression may equip the writer with much greater sensitivity to suffering, having endured “the dark night of the soul.” In more recent times, Stephen Fry’s excellent documentary, “The Secret Life of the Manic Depressive,” illustrated the link between creativity and bipolar disorder. His interview with Carrie Fisher was especially revealing of the accompanying suffering that comes with the illness. While it is true that Charles Dickens was never diagnosed with bipolar disorder in his lifetime, if he was alive today, his GP would be reaching for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (APA,2013), and would find that he met most of the criteria for a diagnosis. The work of Campbell and Jones suggests that if their Fantastic Five (Darwin, Nightingale, Lincoln, Curie and Churchill) were alive today, then stigma towards mental illness might have prevented them achieving the greatness they did (Campbell and Jones, 2009)? Might it also have stopped Dickens?
Dickens' son Henry Fielding Dickens later remembered his 'heavy moods of depression, of intense nervous irritability, when he was silent and oppressed.' Yet he never allowed himself to sink into permanent gloom, and even now there are more accounts of his charm and conviviality than of his low moments (Tomalin, 2011, p. 352). After his death newspaper editorials noted how copiously he had recorded his period making it more vivid and colourful than anything we could have imagined ourselves. Longfellow wrote following his death 'I never knew an author's death to cause such general mourning.' The forces that had driven him to achieve so much have left a lasting legacy of great works and he has become one of the most celebrated literary figures. Hershman and Lieb, suggest that 'his was the greatest success story of the nineteenth century, but he died a tormented man, a man running to meet death head on, driven by manic depression, (Hershman & Lieb, 1998, p. 95).

Conclusions

From the evidence available it appears that mental illness was present in Dickens adult life. In addition Dickens died a tormented man. Can we claim Dickens as being a recovery hero, in light of this information? There is little doubt that he suffered traumatic events in his early life and that he had a flawed personality, at times full of passion and rage, but with a thirst to achieve. It was this driven quality that helped to contribute to his genius as a writer. Dickens is a beacon of hope for the minority of individuals who do not go on to make a complete recovery from mental illness. His
battle with mental illness did not stop him from achieving great things and living a
rich and rewarding life. As the great man himself wrote....

“Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching ....I have been bent and
broken, but I hope into a better shape.” Great Expectations (Dickens, 2012).
References.


Tana, G. (Producer), and Fiennes, R. (Director) (2013), *The Invisible Woman* [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom: Headline Pictures, BBC Films & BFI.
