CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

Little Dorrit

Charles Dickens · *1855–1857 · original English text*

Amy Dorrit is born and raised in the Marshalsea, the debtors' prison where her father is confined, and keeps a gentle fidelity there that fortune later cannot teach him. Around her Dickens sets a whole system for How Not To Do It: the Circumlocution Office, a falling house, a great financier, and hearts priced, weighed, and measured until they almost forget how to love.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What happens to a soul—and to a country—when official life, family pride, and money all learn the art of How Not To Do It?

"Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving--HOW NOT TO DO IT."

Narrator · Book I, Chapter 10

Dickens's answer is not a scheme but a person. Little Dorrit does the needed thing, quietly, in a prison and out of it. Arthur Clennam must unlearn a religion that only weighs and measures, and must be willing to be poor again. The Circumlocution Office, Mrs Clennam's house, and Mr Merdle's credit all collapse under their own lie.

KEY CHARACTERS

Amy Dorrit
Little Dorrit: born in the Marshalsea, faithful in poverty and in riches

Arthur Clennam
A middle-aged man home from China, who must unlearn a weighed-and-measured religion

William Dorrit
The Father of the Marshalsea, ruined by pride as much as by debt

Mrs Clennam
Arthur's stern "mother," imprisoned in a house and a doctrine of repayment

Mr Merdle
The great financier whose credit Society cannot bear to question

Daniel Doyce
An honest inventor, defeated for a time by How Not To Do It

Flintwinch and Affery
Servants of the Clennam house, keepers of its noises and its secret

Rigaud / Blandois
A murderer and blackmailer who smells the hidden wrong

HOW TO DO IT, AND A RELIGION THAT IS NOT A PRICE

> *"Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving--HOW NOT TO DO IT."*
>
> **Narrator** · Book I, Chapter 10

> *"I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything; for whom what could not be weighed, measured, and priced, had no existence."*
>
> **Arthur Clennam** · Book I, Chapter 2

Grades 9–12

Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01 The Child of the Marshalsea

BOOK I, CHAPTERS 1–9

A girl born in a debtors' prison becomes its unofficial caretaker.

- The book opens among prisoners in Marseilles, then in London at Mrs Clennam's darkened house
- Arthur Clennam, home from the East, feels that a wrong is hidden in his mother's grim religion
- Amy Dorrit, called Little Dorrit, was born in the Marshalsea and supports her proud father, William Dorrit, the Father of the Marshalsea
- A prison taint is on everything there: air, light, men, and the family's manners

> *"A prison taint was on everything there."*
>
> **Narrator** · Book I, Chapter 6

02 How Not To Do It

BOOK I, CHAPTERS 10–19

Arthur looks for a remedy and meets the great national art of delay.

- The Circumlocution Office has risen by perceiving, in advance of all other departments, How Not To Do It
- Arthur's inquiries on the Dorrit claim are smothered in forms, references, and Barnacles
- Daniel Doyce, an inventor, cannot get a hearing for a useful work
- Arthur's kindness to the Dorrits grows; he does not yet see that he loves Amy

> *"Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving--HOW NOT TO DO IT."*
>
> **Narrator** · Book I, Chapter 10

03 Fortune at Last

BOOK I, CHAPTERS 20–36

A hidden inheritance frees the family, and the prison goes with them.

- Pancks traces a fortune that makes William Dorrit a rich man
- The family leaves the Marshalsea in state; the shadow of its wall is not so easily left
- Mrs Clennam's house still keeps the words Do Not Forget, and Arthur still suspects a concealed wrong
- Flintwinch and the traveller Blandois (Rigaud) move around that secret

04 Society and Mr Merdle

BOOK II, CHAPTERS 1–19

Riches buy a place among the Barnacles; a great financier is believed because he is believed.

- The Dorrits travel in Italy and learn the manners of Society; Fanny aims high; Amy remains herself
- William Dorrit cannot bear to be reminded of the Marshalsea, and breaks down in a Roman banquet with the old prison speech
- Mr Merdle, the man of the age, is a hollow credit around whom Society gathers
- Arthur, left in London, invests with Doyce and is drawn toward the same crash

05 The Fall of the House

BOOK II, CHAPTERS 20–34

Credit, a grim house, and a long imprisonment all come down; Amy and Arthur meet as equals.

- Merdle's suicide reveals the fraud; Arthur is ruined and enters the Marshalsea himself
- Little Dorrit comes to him there, as he once came to her, and offers her fortune; he will not take it as a debt
- Mrs Clennam's buried wrong is forced into the light; her house collapses
- Amy and Arthur marry quietly, with no more Circumlocution than a full heart needs, and go down into a useful life

Imprisonment | Duty and Love | Pride | Official Delay | False Credit | A Living Faith

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The Circumlocution Office is funny until you notice that useful work, and a just claim, cannot get through it. "HOW NOT TO DO IT" is the book's political name for a moral habit.
2. Arthur's opening confession—parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything, including their religion—is the other prison in the book.
3. The phrase "Do Not Forget" on the watch and in the house is a clue, not a sermon. Track who is being told to remember, and what.
4. William Dorrit freed is still a prisoner. The shadow of the Marshalsea wall can be seen on the family at any stage of the sun's course.
5. Amy's constancy is not meekness only. She works, she tells the truth, and she will not buy Arthur with her fortune.
6. The hosted text is Dickens's original English (Project Gutenberg #963), in two books.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #963, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/little-dorrit/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.