



The great characters

Dickens' novels are made by his characters.

His stories turn on a rich and plentiful cast of villains, angels, and everything between.

Some are complex and nuanced, others larger-than-life caricatures, but are all vividly conjured. Being memorable and compelling, many of them have become familiar points of reference for popular culture. Similarly, numerous and varied film adaptations regularly bring Dickens' creations to new audiences, helping to explain how well-known some characters have become, not just by those who have read the books.

We have brought together here a selection of characters from Dickens' works. There are many famous and infamous favourites - Miss Havisham, Scrooge, Fagin - as well as some wonderful but more obscure players too.

We'll tell you something about each character, starting with five today, and then others as the week goes on.

How many have you come across? Are there great characters we have overlooked? Get in touch via our social media pages and let us know who else you think belongs on the list of Dickens' greatest!



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John Jasper

from the unfinished novel *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (published 1870)



She has never seen him since the fatal night, except when she was questioned before the Mayor, and then he was present in gloomy watchfulness, as representing his lost nephew and burning to avenge him. She hangs her garden-hat on her arm, and goes out. The moment she sees him from the porch, leaning on the sun-dial, the old horrible feeling of being compelled by him, asserts its hold upon her. She feels that she would even then go back, but that he draws her feet towards him. She cannot resist, and sits down, with her head bent, on the garden-seat beside the sun-dial. She cannot look up at him for abhorrence, but she has perceived that he is dressed in deep mourning. So is she. It was not so at first; but the lost has long been given up, and mourned for, as dead.

John Jasper is the uncle of Edwin in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. This was Dickens' last (and unfinished) novel, set in a thinly-disguised Rochester. A Choirmaster at 'Cloisterham Cathedral' and outwardly respectable, Jasper is a secret opium addict. This brings him into close contact with a seamier side of life, and allows Dickens scope to create a fantastic supporting cast of drug-addled unfortunates - Princess Puffer among them. Jasper is also in love with his nephew's betrothed, Rosa.

What is Jasper's character? Rosa's alarm at seeing him leaning on the sundial may give some hint. The incomplete nature of the narrative has led to much speculation and some have hypothesised Dickens would ultimately have revealed him as a murderer.

In 1914 the Dickens Fellowship organised a dramatic (but light-hearted) trial of Jasper, who

stood before a judge and jury, accused of killing Edwin Drood. The judge was G. K. Chesterton, best known for the Father Brown mystery stories. Other famous literary figures, including George Bernard Shaw, acted as the jury. After the jury was led merrily astray by Shaw, Chesterton ruled that the mystery of Edwin Drood was insoluble and fined everyone, except himself, for contempt of court.

We shall never know the truth of how Dickens' intended to resolve the mystery, but you can develop your own theory by joining in with our read-along this summer:
readingdrood.wordpress.com

John Jasper

the Dickens character most likely to...
...have contraband up his cassock.



Sam Weller

from the novel *The Pickwick Papers* (published 1836 - 1837)

.....

'It's a verry remarkable circumstance, sir,' said Sam, 'that poverty and oysters always seems to go together.'

'I don't understand you, Sam,' said Mr. Pickwick.

'What I mean, sir,' said Sam, 'is, that the poorer a place is, the greater call there seems to be for oysters. Look here, sir; here's a oyster stall to every half-dozen houses. The street's lined vith 'em. Blessed if I don't think that ven a man's verry poor, he rushes out of his lodgings, and eats oysters in reg'lar desperation.'

.....



It is the appearance of Sam Weller in the fourth number of the *The Pickwick Papers* that lights the blue touchpaper and launches Dickens towards huge international fame in 1836. William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette*, snipped out a few extracts and printed them in the July and August issues of his magazine. Suddenly the secret was out.

A Londoner to his fingertips, Sam's sharp good humour, definitive cockney patter and general bounce-back-ability gave ordinary people a version of themselves they not only liked, but could believe in. It also helped that Sam's unshakeable faith in (and willingness to work for) Mr Pickwick underlined his non-threatening status. No political

radicalism here, just a tongue firmly in the cheek. Dickens puts Sam's robust common sense to good use as he searches for a plot to bring some kind of order to the roistering comedy of his first novel. Sam steers Mr Pickwick through the wicked world, rescuing him from all kinds of scrapes when he can and sticking with him when he cannot, though the faithful servant eventually acquiesces in the forgiveness the master bestows upon his enemies.

Sam Weller

the Dickens character most likely to...

...break the internet after his
prime time vox pop goes viral.



Magwitch

AKA Provis or Mr Campbell from the novel *Great Expectations* (published 1860 - 1861)



A fearful man, all in coarse grey, with a great iron on his leg. A man with no hat, and with broken shoes, and with an old rag tied round his head. A man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud, and lamed by stones, and cut by flints, and stung by nettles, and torn by briars; who limped and shivered, and glared and growled; and whose teeth chattered in his head as he seized me by the chin.

This is the terrifying impression that Abel Magwitch, an escaped convict from a prison hulk, makes on Pip in one of literature's most memorable openings. This meeting will have far reaching ramifications for Pip. For now, however, scared out of his wits, he steals food and a file for the desperate felon, and hopes to never see him again.

Magwitch is used by Dickens to spotlight some of the stark inequities that exist in Victorian society. His treatment at the hands of the legal system is harsh and without compassion. As Magwitch says, when he was a child no-one who saw him, 'with as little on him as in him' was not frightened, and 'drove him off'. His status as a homeless, uneducated, urchin cuts no ice with the law.

That he gets double the sentence of his educated, charming and 'gentlemanly' accomplice (actually the arch schemer responsible for conceiving the crime) attests to that.

A powerful and sympathetic character for modern audiences, Magwitch's victim status is plain to see, and has inspired writers to fill in the gaps. In the 2012 Film, *Magwitch* his imagined backstory is explored www.imdb.com/title/tt2210791/

Magwitch

the Dickens character most likely to...
...invest in the Artful Dodger's
new business in Australia.

Nancy

from the novel *Oliver Twist* (published 1837 - 1839)
released as a three-volume book in 1838, before the serialization ended.

.....

I must go back. Whether it is God's wrath for the wrong I have done, I do not know; but I am drawn back to him through every suffering and ill usage; and I should be, I believe, if I knew that I was to die by his hand at last.

.....



Nancy is the original, 'Tart with a Heart'. A close associate of Fagin and his gang, and in love with Bill Sikes, who ultimately murders her, Nancy is one of the more rounded characters in *Oliver Twist*. At home in London's sordid underworld, and no stranger to immoral, illegal acts, she is ultimately Oliver's saviour. Most of the characters are deliberately drawn black or white but Nancy is more shaded. Although a fully-fledged criminal the compassion she feels for Oliver, trumps her loyalty to Sikes and Fagin and she finds the moral courage to act in the innocent child's interests.

By showing Nancy as having a generous nature and a natural sense of justice Dickens encourages us to acknowledge her goodness. The brutal depiction of Nancy's death seems designed to command our sympathy ('he had struck and struck again. . . there was the body - mere flesh and blood, no more - but such flesh and so much blood!').

But while Nancy atones for her sins, there is a sense in which, both in her own eyes and that of the Victorian readership, she has fallen too far from honest ways for fate to let her have a happy ending.

Views were shifting in England but most would still have considered degeneracy rather than poverty as the root cause of Nancy's unhappy circumstances.

Kay Walsh played the part of Nancy in the 1948 film version of *Oliver Twist*, directed by David Lean. She was married to Lean at the time and also devised the film's opening scene.

Nancy

the Dickens character most likely to...
...enjoy a nice city break in Berlin
to coincide with Oktoberfest.



Bill Sikes

AKA William Sikes from the novel *Oliver Twist* (published 1837 - 1839)



A stoutly-built fellow of about five-and-thirty, in a black velveteen coat, very soiled drab breeches, lace-up half boots, and grey cotton stockings which inclosed a bulky pair of legs, with large swelling calves;--the kind of legs, which in such costume, always look in an unfinished and incomplete state without a set of fetters to garnish them. He had a brown hat on his head, and a dirty belcher handkerchief round his neck: with the long frayed ends of which he smeared the beer from his face as he spoke. He disclosed, when he had done so, a broad heavy countenance with a beard of three days' growth, and two scowling eyes; one of which displayed various parti-coloured symptoms of having been recently damaged by a blow.

Bill Sikes is a burglar and murderer with few if any redeeming qualities. He is the product of a brutalising existence and has lost all traces of human tenderness. Without conscience or principle, he displays the same callous contempt for both Nancy, his devoted girlfriend, and his dog, Bull's-eye.

Unlike Nancy, Bull's-eye at least is wise to his master and gives as good as he gets: *'You would, would you?' said Sikes, seizing the poker in one hand, and deliberately opening with the other a large clasp-knife, which he drew from his pocket. 'Come here, you born devil! Come here! D'ye hear?' The dog no doubt heard; because Mr. Sikes spoke in the very harshest key of a very harsh voice; but, appearing to entertain some unaccountable objection to having his throat cut, he remained where he was, and growled more fiercely than before: at the same time grasping the end of the poker between his teeth, and biting at it like a wild beast.*

Bull's-eye is his constant companion, shadowing him throughout. Despite this, Sikes does not hesitate to try and drown Bull's-eye when he thinks travelling with him will make him more recognisable to the lawmen from whom he is fleeing having viciously beaten Nancy to death.

Dickens included in his reading tour of 1868 a highly charged re-enactment of Nancy's murder. He played the scene with such violent passion women were reported to have fainted in the aisles. At the time his family was deeply concerned; it has been suggested that the exertion of these performances may have hastened his death.

Bill Sikes

the Dickens character most likely to...
...**not** get picked to look after the class hamster during the holidays.