



# *The great characters*

Here are today's selection of the greatest characters from the works of Charles Dickens.

We'd love to hear your thoughts.  
How many have you come across?  
Are there great characters we have overlooked? Get in touch and let us know who else you think belongs on the list of Dickens' greatest!

Drop us a line via our social media pages and we'll do our best to publish as many of your comments and suggestions as possible.



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# Dolly Varden

from the novel *Barnaby Rudge* (published 1840 - 1841)



As to Dolly, there she was again, the very pink and pattern of good looks, in a smart little cherry-coloured mantle, with a hood of the same drawn over her head, and upon the top of that hood, a little straw hat trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and worn the merest trifle on one side-just enough in short to make it the wickedest and most provoking head-dress that ever malicious milliner devised.

When and where was there ever, such a plump, roguish, comely, bright-eyed, enticing, bewitching, captivating, maddening little puss in all this world, as Dolly!

*Barnaby Rudge* is one of only two historical novels by Charles Dickens (the second being *A Tale of Two Cities*) and is largely set during the Gordon Riots of 1780. Dickens first got the idea for the novel in 1836 but a number of factors meant it was the fifth in line to be published. The delay may have proved lucky as his debut *The Pickwick Papers* met with a rapturous welcome, unlike *Rudge* the sales for which dropped from 70,000 at the start of the serialisation back to 30,000 by the close. Critics at the time included Edgar Allan Poe, who concluded, 'He has done this thing well, to be sure - he would do anything well in comparison with the herd of his contemporaries - but he has not done it so thoroughly well as his high and just reputation would demand...'

Described as 'the least loved and the least read', *Barnaby Rudge* has rarely been adapted for film or television. Consequently, few of the characters from the novel (including Barnaby himself) have much

cut through today. At the time, Dolly Varden, at least, did spark the public's imagination.

While the novel itself may not have been a huge hit, Dolly, the beautiful coquettish daughter of the honest locksmith, certainly was. The Dolly Varden Look - an updated version of 1780s fashion - was all the rage with Victorian ladies from around 1869.

Dolly also had a species of trout named after her on account of its glamorous appearance: yellow spots on the back, reddish spots on the sides, and a lower fin with a white edge!

## Dolly Varden

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...stand you up having been distracted by  
the sight of herself in a shop window.



# Paul Dombey

from the novel *Dombey and Son* (published 1846 - 1848)



*He loved to be alone; and in those short intervals when he was not occupied with his books, liked nothing so well as wandering about the house by himself, or sitting on the stairs, listening to the great clock in the hall. He was intimate with all the paper-hanging in the house; saw things that no one else saw in the patterns; found out miniature tigers and lions running up the bedroom walls, and squinting faces leering in the squares and diamonds of the floor-cloth.*

*Dombey and Son* was sensationally successful and was the novel which finally made Dickens financially secure. The life and death of Paul, the only son of cold, proud businessman Dombey, brought to Dickens' writing a new type of sympathetic effect and took his audiences to a new intensity of emotional engagement.

His great rival Thackeray burst into the offices of *Punch*, the magazine he was working for at the time, waving the fifth instalment around and protesting: 'There's no writing against such power as this - one has no chance!' Paul is Mr Dombey's great hope for the perpetuation of his business empire, though a less worldly child could hardly be imagined. Smothered by his father's ambition, but starved of his affection, he turns instead to his

elder, neglected, sister Florence. Sent to a boarding school in Brighton so that the sea air can make him strong, he declines and dies. To a modern reader the treatment of his final illness can seem sentimental, although the way in which Paul's consciousness seems to absorb and take over the narrative makes for a resonant and disorientating experience: and one that, for good and ill, has helped to define Dickens' literary identity.

## Paul Dombey

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...enliven your experience of the supermarket queue by staring at people and asking awkward questions.



# Mrs Gamp

from the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (published 1842 - 1844)



*She was a fat old woman, this Mrs Gamp, with a husky voice and a moist eye, which she had a remarkable power of turning up, and only showing the white of it. Having very little neck, it cost her some trouble to look over herself, if one may say so, at those to whom she talked. She wore a very rusty black gown, rather the worse for snuff, and a shawl and bonnet to correspond... The face of Mrs Gamp – the nose in particular – was somewhat red and swollen, and it was difficult to enjoy her society without becoming conscious of a smell of spirits.*

Mrs Gamp is a nurse who makes her living sitting with the sick, attending pregnant women and laying out corpses. She is scheming, delusional, cynical, dirty and irritable. She is always drunk. She is also pure comedy gold and one of the funniest and most vivid characters Dickens ever created.

Her long rambling speeches are full of bizarre incidental detail, hilariously mangled English and startlingly robust attitudes towards the suffering of her fellow creatures. She frequently quotes the testimony of a fictional friend – Mrs Harris – whenever her credentials are called into question, and this leads to an altercation with colleague

Betsey Prig, who dares to disbelieve in her existence. She is involved in various parts of the rather wayward plot of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, but none of that is really important: just Dickens' astonishing talent for conjuring life out of nothing in all its joyful and unaccountable richness.

## Mrs Gamp

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...inevitably sit next to you on public transport.

# William Dorrit

from the novel *Little Dorrit* (published 1855 - 1857)

.....

*Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it. He was under lock and key; but the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out. If he had been a man with strength of purpose to face those troubles and fight them, he might have broken the net that held him, or broken his heart; but being what he was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never more took one step upward.*

.....



Perhaps Dickens' most sombre work, *Little Dorrit* is a novel full of prisons – actual, metaphorical and psychological. The central character, Amy, is born in one after her father, William Dorrit, is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea – just like Dickens' own father had been. He is scared, irresolute, 'very amiable and very helpless:' and, fatally, soon comes to rely completely on the prison walls to sustain his sense of himself.

He remains inside for so long, he becomes known as the 'Father of the Marshalsea' and adopts a condescending air of patronage towards his fellow prisoners, while mercilessly sponging off them, and off visitors, at every opportunity. Halfway through the novel, an astonishing financial windfall frees

him and he takes his family, including Amy, on a tour of fashionable locations throughout Europe. Extravagantly sensitive to his social status, he continually criticizes his daughter for not living up to the behaviour their enormous wealth appears to demand.

However, when he suffers a breakdown at a dinner party, and addresses his fellow guests as though they were his old Marshalsea confederates, it is Amy who attends him and nurses him to the end.

**William Dorrit**  
the Dickens character most likely to...  
...travel First Class.



# Sydney Carton

from the novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (published 1859)



...this one man sat leaning back, with his torn gown half off him, his untidy wig put on just as it had happened to light on his head after its removal, his hands in his pockets, and his eyes on the ceiling as they had been all day. Something especially reckless in his demeanour, not only gave him a disreputable look, but so diminished the strong resemblance he undoubtedly bore to the prisoner (which his momentary earnestness, when they were compared together, had strengthened), that many of the lookers-on, taking note of him now, said to one another they would hardly have thought the two were so alike.

*A Tale of Two Cities* is set in London and Paris at the time of the French Revolution. Sydney Carton is a dissolute young lawyer who has quite given up on himself. Alcoholic, dirty, cynical and rude, he nevertheless forms a crack partnership with his colleague Stryver in court - Carton provides the brains and the hard work, Stryver the rhetoric and the polish.

A light shines on Carton's life in the shape of Lucie Manette, daughter of a French revolutionary hero living in London. Quickly realising his hopes of deserving Lucie are hopelessly unfounded, he devotes himself to her welfare and the welfare of

those she loves. So when all are swept up in the events of the Paris Terror, and Lucie's husband is condemned to death for the actions of a distant relative, Carton takes advantage of a chance physical resemblance to save him. He swaps clothes, mounts the steps of the guillotine and walks into one of the most famous closing scenes in the whole of English literature.

## Sydney Carton

the Dickens character most likely to...

...get you off that traffic violation  
then pay the fine for you anyway.

