



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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Ebenezer Scrooge

from the novella *A Christmas Carol* (published 1843)

.....

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind-stone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster.

.....



From the moment it was published, *A Christmas Carol* was a hit with audiences, and has been ever since. Little wonder: Dickens' brilliance as a storyteller is nowhere more obvious. *A Christmas Carol* is a timeless, resonant tale of a redemption brought about by the combined efforts of the spirit world. Together the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Christmas Present, and Christmas Yet to Come, gang up on the miserly misanthropic Ebenezer Scrooge, and show him the error of his ways. Their success, just in time for everyone to share a merry yuletide, gives us one of literature's most quoted happy endings - 'God bless us, every one!' conveying perfectly the fellow feeling to which Scrooge has been awakened.

Ebenezer Scrooge is undoubtedly one of Dickens' most famous characters, making his presence felt across popular culture, with adults and children alike. The list of famous people who have taken on the part is long and varied. Orson Welles,

Michael Horden, Albert Finney, not to mention Syd James (*Carry On Christmas Specials*), Michael Caine (*The Muppet Christmas Carol*), Rowan Atkinson (*Blackadder's Christmas Carol*), and Seth MacFarlane as Peter Griffin in a *Family Guy* episode: *Don't Be a Dickens at Christmas*. There are non-humans too: Scrooge McDuck and The Grinch who stole Christmas both have more than a passing resemblance to Dickens' creation, who even pops up in an episode of *Scooby Doo*, naturally titled, *Scroogey Doo*.

In 1982 'Scrooge' entered the Oxford English Dictionary, to designate 'a miserly, tight-fisted person or killjoy' cementing Ebenezer's stature for good.

Ebenezer Scrooge

the Dickens character most likely to...
...dry out and re-use his teabags.



Little Nell

AKA Nelly Trent from the novel *The Old Curiosity Shop*
(published serially 1840 - 1841)

.....
'Let me persuade you then - oh, do let me persuade you,' said the child, 'to think no more of gains or losses, and to try no fortune but the fortune we pursue together.'
.....



The Old Curiosity Shop, with its peculiar odds and ends, is home to Nell Trent, a girl of 'not quite fourteen', and her grandfather. Little Nell, as she is affectionately known, is arguably the most unambiguously angelic of all Dickens' female creations. A kind, gentle and virtuous girl, she will pay the ultimate price for her grandfather's gambling addiction.

Dickens was deeply moved by the death of Little Nell but subsequently the episode has been considered by some critics too syrupy by far, and the height of sentimentality. 'Very interesting and cleverly written', was Queen Victoria's verdict on the novel. Oscar Wilde famously wrote in a letter to a friend, 'one must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing.'

The reading public at the time, however, were firmly aligned with their monarch. Similarly, American audiences found Nell a compelling, sympathetic character. So invested were they, Dickens' fans met the shipment containing the last instalment in considerable numbers, calling out anxious questions to the sailors about the fate of their beloved heroine. In 2007 many newspapers used the 1841 scenes as something with which to compare the fanatical anticipation and reception of the final instalment of the Harry Potter series.

Little Nell

the Dickens character most likely to...
...let you choose the film and
have the last onion bhaji.

Wackford Squeers

from the novel *Nicholas Nickleby* (published 1838 - 1839)

.....

'We go upon the practical mode of teaching, Nickleby; the regular education system. C-l-e-a-n, clean, verb active, to make bright, to scour. W-i-n, win, d-e-r, der, winder, a casement. When the boy knows this out of the book, he goes and does it. It's just the same principle as the use of the globes.'

.....



The schoolmaster Squeers is about as dark as comedy can get. He sprang from a research trip Dickens and his illustrator, 'Phiz', made to Yorkshire in January 1838. They were interested in the notorious boarding schools there which had become repositories for unwanted or illegitimate children. Their adverts (which Dickens parodies accurately in the novel) make great play of suspiciously cheap fees and 'no holidays.' Children were sent there to be forgotten.

Squeers was partly modelled on a William Shaw of Bowes Academy, who had been prosecuted in 1823 when two boys in his care had gone blind. Nicholas

Nickleby, in a desperate attempt to earn money to support his mother and sister, gets a job at Squeers' school. Shocked by the treatment he witnesses, he is driven to punish Squeers by thrashing him with his own cane in front of the boys. The reader's reaction to the whole Yorkshire episode veers wildly between breathless horror at the abuse and appalled hilarity at the monstrous energy of Squeers' evil.

Wackford Squeers

the Dickens character most likely to...
...require a visit from OFSTED.



Inspector Bucket

from the novel *Bleak House* (published 1852 - 1853)

.....

For the most part Mr. Bucket notices things in general, with a face as unchanging as the great mourning ring on his little finger or the brooch, composed of not much diamond and a good deal of setting, which he wears in his shirt.

.....



Dickens was fascinated by the police force and wrote about it a lot. Inspector Bucket is the most enduring example of his enthusiasm and careful research. He is thought to be based on Charles Frederick Field, who had joined the Metropolitan Police on its formation in 1829 and rose through the ranks to become chief of the Detective Department in 1846. He accompanied Dickens on many trips through the London underworld, which Dickens wrote about in his magazine *Household Words*.

Bucket himself is often called the first detective in English fiction and was extremely influential.

Today we can recognise many of his character traits that have become familiar to us from a whole multitude of crime and police series. There are the eccentricities masking an essential goodness: the ever-present obsessive watchfulness: the rather shady familiarity with criminals and their ways: the meditative methods: the bursts of action: the air of menace.

Inspector Bucket

the Dickens character most likely to...
...have a file in his desk with your name on.



Miss Havisham

from the novel *Great Expectations* (published 1860 - 1861)

.....

'She was dressed in rich materials--satins, and lace, and silks--all white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white...I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its lustre, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose, had shrunk to skin and bone.'

.....



Miss Havisham is the essence of bitter and twisted. Abandoned (and defrauded) by her husband-to-be, by letter, on what was to be her wedding day, she becomes consumed with a hatred towards men. She lives a reclusive life, surrounded by the decayed remnants of her untouched wedding breakfast, and still decked out as the bride. Her home, which Pip describes as, 'old brick, and dismal' and with 'a great many iron bars to it', is modelled on Rochester's own Restoration House. Dickens ironically renames it, 'Satis House' in the novel.

Miss Havisham adopts and grooms a young girl – Estella – to be a vehicle for her revenge. Pip is summoned supposedly in response to Miss Havisham's 'sick fancy' to be entertained by watching Pip and Estella play together. Later, however, it becomes clear, Pip is intended as Estella's practice material as she hones her ability to spurn men under Miss Havisham's influence: 'Miss Havisham would embrace her with lavish fondness, murmuring something in her ear that sounded like,

'Break their hearts, my pride and hope, break their hearts and have no mercy!'

In 2008 scientists discovered that enduring grief for a lost love can trigger the brain's reward centres, thus becoming addictive; they dubbed this phenomenon, The Miss Havisham Effect. It is not surprising that such a vivid character has recognition well beyond the world of fiction.

The Observer's political cartoonist relied on our knowledge of *Great Expectations* to make his point in this illustration:

www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/picture/2018/nov/24/theresa-may-waits-and-waits-for-brex

Miss Havisham

the Dickens character most likely to...

...feel the benefits of a visit
from Kim Woodburn.

