



# *The great characters*

Here are our final 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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# Mr Bounderby

from the novel *Hard Times* (published 1854)



*He was a rich man: banker, merchant, manufacturer, and what not. A big, loud man, with a stare, and a metallic laugh. A man made out of a coarse material, which seemed to have been stretched to make so much of him. A man with a great puffed head and forehead, swelled veins in his temples, and such a strained skin to his face that it seemed to hold his eyes open, and lift his eyebrows up. A man with a pervading appearance on him of being inflated like a balloon, and ready to start. A man who could never sufficiently vaunt himself a self-made man. A man who was always proclaiming, through that brassy speaking-trumpet of a voice of his, his old ignorance and his old poverty. A man who was the Bully of humility.*

Mr Bounderby is a monster of hypocrisy. Dickens uses him to satirise the figure of the new-made industrialist who boasts of his humble origins in order to puff up his own achievements and justify his harsh behaviour towards his employees.

The novel reveals Bounderby to be even worse than he at first appears. He particularly relishes inflicting people with stories of his own childhood – his mother, who ‘bolted’ and his grandmother who sold his shoes ‘for drink.’ In fact he has himself banished

his (adoring) mother and forbidden her to come and see him. He bullies his friend’s young daughter into a disastrous marriage, which collapses, and ends the novel exposed and humiliated.

## Mr Bounderby

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...host a new series of *The Apprentice*.

# Fagin

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



*"Some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare; and seemed to be dividing his attention between the frying-pan and the clothes-horse, over which a great number of silk handkerchiefs were hanging."*

From Dickens' time to our own, readers have criticised the racially-stereotyped presentation of Fagin. Indeed, Dickens himself adjusted his portrayal in later editions of *Oliver Twist* in response to the considerable offence expressed by some of his readers. He may have regretted the slur he was perceived to have cast but, Dickens' skill at creating dramatic, resonant villains, means Fagin is very memorable.

In the novel Fagin is described as a, 'loathsome reptile' having, 'fangs such as should have been a dog's or rat's'. Fagin is the embodiment of terror and ruthlessness. He is vicious, manipulative, self-interested and without scruple.

By the time Ron Moody came to play him in the 1968 film *Oliver*, and perhaps as a response to the discomfort of audiences at the antisemitism (intended or not), Fagin had undergone something

of a transformation: 'And though I'd be the first one to say that I wasn't a saint, I'm finding it hard to be really as black as they paint...' he sings. In Lionel Bart's musical, from which many people have built up their image, Fagin is a more sympathetic character, not entirely without heart. Unlike in the book, he is not responsible for Nancy's death, does not plot with Monks or go to the gallows, and instead gets to dance off into a radiant sunrise with the Artful Dodger.

How you rate Fagin will depend heavily on whether you know him through the page or the screen.

## Fagin

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...offer to buy a round and then  
borrow money from you to pay for it.



# The Artful Dodger

AKA Jack Dawkins from the novel *Oliver Twist* (published 1837 - 1839)



*He was a snub-nosed, flat-browed, common-faced boy enough; and as dirty a juvenile as one would wish to see; but he had about him all the airs and manners of a man. He was short of his age: with rather bow-legs, and little, sharp, ugly eyes. His hat was stuck on the top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment - and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch, which brought it back to its old place again... He was, altogether, as roistering and swaggering a young gentleman as ever stood four feet six, or something less, in his bluchers.*

The Dodger is a skilful and cunning pickpocket and leader of a gang of child criminals. Despite a hard life on the wrong side of the law he is upbeat and remarkably resilient, almost insuppressible. After he is finally convicted Dickens describes him like this: *With these last words, the Dodger suffered himself to be led off by the collar, threatening, till he got into the yard, to make a parliamentary business of it, and then grinning in the officer's face, with great glee and self-approval.*

Dodger shows kindness to Oliver, and loyalty and respect to Fagin (but ultimately betrays Oliver when he is caught). Arguably more of a scamp

than an out-and-out baddun, he has a compelling personality, which many writers and dramatists have sought to give life to beyond *Oliver Twist*.

For example, a 2001 Australian children's show - *Escape of the Artful Dodger* - followed his adventures in an Australian penal colony and on to his eventual redemption.

## Artful Dodger

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...land on his feet down-under and start a  
successful business selling antiques.

# Mr Venus

from the novel *Our Mutual Friend* (published 1864 - 1865)

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*The face looking up is a sallow face with weak eyes, surmounted by a tangle of reddish-dusty hair. The owner of the face has no cravat on, and has opened his tumbled shirt-collar to work with the more ease. For the same reason he has no coat on: only a loose waistcoat over his yellow linen. His eyes are like the over-tried eyes of an engraver, but he is not that; his expression and stoop are like those of a shoemaker, but he is not that.*

.....



Mr Venus is a taxidermist. He is in demand as a bone articulator – providing teaching aids for hospitals and art schools. He is also a wonderful example of Dickens' special talent for the grotesque – richly comic, creepy and uncomfortable. His gloomy shop is dim nightmare of mounted animals, human bones, glass eyes and dead babies in jars.

When we first meet him he is toasting a muffin in front of a fire using a wire he has just taken from the breast of a stuffed bird. Such is the disorder and darkness that he accidentally includes a stray tooth in the loose change he hands to a customer.

Mr Venus though is melancholy because of an unrequited love. In this low state, he is tempted into a conspiracy with the chief villain of the book, Mr Wegg, who comes to Venus' shop to try to trace his amputated leg. In the end, Venus comes to his senses, helps to trap Wegg and wins his lady.

## Mr Venus

the Dickens character most likely to...  
...help out at the Guildhall Museum.

# Betsey Trotwood

from the novel *David Copperfield* (published 1849 - 1850)



*My aunt was a tall, hard-featured lady, but by no means ill-looking. There was an inflexibility in her face, in her voice, in her gait and carriage, amply sufficient to account for the effect she had made upon a gentle creature like my mother; but her features were rather handsome than otherwise, though unbending and austere.*

It looks to the reader as though *David Copperfield* has quite finished and done with Betsey Trotwood within its very first chapter. The great aunt of central character David, she turns up just before his birth, terrifying his mother by peering through the window and 'pressing the end of her nose against the glass to that extent, that...it became perfectly flat and white in a moment.'

She comes having fully decided in her own mind that the baby is to be a girl, her goddaughter, and named after her. So once the disappointing David appears, she packs up, walks out and vanishes 'like a discontented fairy.' But David seeks her out again, made desperate by the death of his mother and the brutal treatment he receives at the hands of his

stepfather. Betsey's true goodness is revealed while Dickens continues to give her eccentricities full expression.

Eventually David comes to learn of her own suffering past and her current financial difficulties and she in turn supports him through two marriages and the beginning of his successful career as a writer.

## Betsey Trotwood

the Dickens character most likely to...

...donate to your chosen charity  
(unless it is the local donkey sanctuary).