

# Why is Dickens so popular?

At a British Academy event held on 8 February 2012 to celebrate the bicentenary of Charles Dickens's birth, **Professor John Carey FBA** discussed the author's enduring popularity.



'Dickens' Dream', painted by Robert William Buss in 1875 (Charles Dickens Museum, London). The dozing author sits in his Gad's Hill Place study, surrounded by many of the characters he had created. Image: Wikipedia Commons

Dickens created characters who have become part of the English language. Very few authors have done that; Shakespeare and Dickens have. Dickens has Pecksniff, Oliver Twist, Micawber, and Scrooge – who I suppose is the favourite. (In a recent *Oxford Times* poll on Dickens characters, Scrooge came out on top. I imagine this is Ebenezer Scrooge in his unreformed state, not once he had become soft and amiable.)

But I would argue that Dickens has remained popular for another reason: because he was not an intellectual. Dickens's likes and dislikes were those of the man on the Clapham omnibus; they were the likes and dislikes you would hear in a pub.

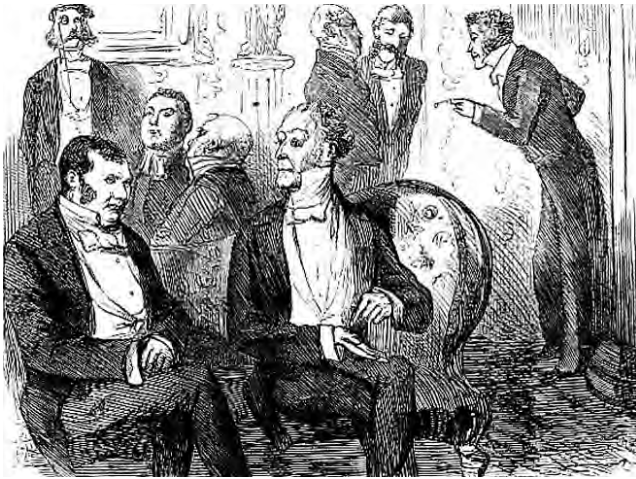
## **Dickens's dislikes**

First of all, he disliked politicians very much indeed. He had, of course, been a Parliamentary Reporter, so he spoke from experience. He says in *Hard Times* that the House of Commons is 'the national cinder-heap' and Members of Parliament are 'national dustmen'. The rituals of

Parliamentary procedure were, he thought, ridiculous. He says, in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, that no medicine man could produce anything 'so supremely ludicrous as the two Masters in Chancery holding up their black petticoats and butting their ridiculous wigs at Mr. Speaker'.

He also disliked bureaucracy and red tape. In *Little Dorrit* he created the Circumlocution Office, which anticipated Kafka. The Circumlocution Office depicts the Civil Service as an elaborate and costly mechanism for not getting anything done. He complained that the British Government was an extensive network of parasites and extended across the globe. Mr Gowan in *Little Dorrit*, we are told, belonged 'to a legation abroad' and 'died at his post with his drawn salary in his hand'.

Dickens had no love for aristocrats, for entitled people. In *Little Dorrit* we have Lord Decimus Tite Barnacle and all the lesser Barnacles, clinging to privilege as barnacles do. I think Dickens would be astounded to know that we still have an Honours List and still call people Lord This and Lady That. He thought it was a lot of nonsense and flummery. He might be quite surprised and quite



'The Merdle Party.' Illustration by Sol Eytinge Jr for an 1871 edition of 'Little Dorrit', showing Mr Merdle, members of the Barnacle clan, and lords of the Circumlocution Office. Image: scan by Philip V. Allingham, available from 'The Victorian Web'.

disappointed that we still have a monarchy. In 1840 he wrote that he longed for 'a democratic, kingless country, free from the shackles of class rule'.

He disliked rich people, city men and bankers very much. He said the kind of people you see at city dinners were 'sleek, slobbering, bow-paunched, over-fed, apoplectic, snorting cattle'. Mr Merdle, the great financier in *Little Dorrit* who ruins thousands of investors and eventually ruins himself, cuts his throat in a hot bath – and Dickens says it is like a sarcophagus: when the water has drained away, there is 'the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features'. So much for bankers.

Arty people also came in for criticism – people who would go into raptures over paintings, sculpture and music. Dickens was what arty people would call a philistine. In Italy he saw the sculptures by Bellini and said they were like 'breezy maniacs'. Amy Dorrit, in *Little Dorrit*, is shown the great paintings in Venice and they leave her cold: Amy Dorrit is not an art fancier, she is an ideal human being. In *Household Words*, Dickens launched a famous attack on the Pre-Raphaelite school of painting, which was sparked by Millais's painting of *Christ in the House of His Parents*: it is, in fact, a kind of philistine manifesto.

He mocked portrait art. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Twemlow, a relative of Lord Snigsworth, has a full-length portrait of the 'sublime Snigsworth over the chimneypiece, snorting at a Corinthian column, with an enormous roll of paper at his feet, and a heavy curtain going to tumble down on his head'. I believe the only painters or artists who appear in the novels are Miss LaCreevy in *Nicholas Nickleby* who is a miniature painter, and Mr Gowan in *Little Dorrit*; Miss LaCreevy is ridiculous and Gowan is a shady poseur.

Music gets the same treatment. Almost all the musicians in the novels are dingy failures, from the feeble Felix Nixon in *Sketches by Boz* who plays the flute, to Frederick Dorrit, William's brother, who plays the clarinet in a small theatre orchestra. The only exception to this procession of failures is John Jasper, the cathedral organist in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, who is positively evil.

Dickens mocks people who pride themselves on their exquisite sensitivity, like Mrs Wittiterly in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Mrs Wittiterly lies prostrate on a sofa and her husband explains that she is so excited by opera, drama and the fine arts that it has taken the strength from her legs; she is a martyr to sensibility. That is rather like Camilla in *Great Expectations*, whose husband says her feelings are so powerful that they 'are gradually ... making one of her legs shorter than the other'.

Politicians, bureaucrats, aristocrats, financiers, rich businessmen and arty people – Dickens disliked and distrusted them all. One might add lawyers to that list, whom he detested, and religious people – or people who pretend to be more religious than others, whom Dickens presents as canting humbugs, like the evangelical Stiggins in *The Pickwick Papers*.

### Dickens's likes

What then did Dickens like and what was he imaginatively excited by? I would say that he was imaginatively excited by the sort of thing that intellectuals and other educated people considered wrong or indecent. That means: crime, violence, murder, detectives, public executions and corpses – particularly corpses.

Whenever he was in Paris, he says he was drawn as if by an invisible force into the morgue where the bodies fished from the Seine were laid out. He even went there on Christmas Day to see the corpse of an old man, with water dripping off the corner of his mouth making him 'look sly'. On other visits there were other corpses, all rapturously described: a corpse lying in a corner 'like a heap of crushed, over-ripe figs'; and a big dark man, disfigured by the water in a way that made him, 'in a frightful manner, comic'. That is a telling moment – corpses are comic as well as horrible in Dickens. And so too are funerals and undertakers: Mr Sowerberry, the undertaker in *Oliver Twist*, uses a snuff box which is 'an ingenious little model of a patent coffin'. Corpses tread that borderline between farce and nightmare where Dickens's richest imaginings happened. *The Pickwick Papers* did not start to sell until Dickens introduced Sam Weller, his first great comic creation. Sam specialises in comic corpses. He tells the story of the man who gets caught up in his own patent sausage-making machine: it only comes to light when a customer finds trouser buttons in the sausages.

This kind of indecent and funny mix-up of corpse and sausage is like Dickens's own memory of what he was like as a child, before his imagination was dulled by adult prejudices and decencies. He remembered being taken by his mother to see a neighbour. The neighbour had given birth to quintuplets, all of whom had died. Dickens says, 'I was introduced to the five deceased young people, lying side by side on a clean cloth on the chest of drawers, reminding me, by a homely association, of pigs' feet as they are usually displayed in a neat tripe shop'.

Corpses intrigue him because they are human and not human at the same time. In that respect they are like waxworks, ships' figureheads, Punch and Judy puppets, or like the dolls that Jenny Wren makes in *Our Mutual Friend*.



Creatures in the shape of humans who are not human crowd Dickens's novels: sometimes they are sinister and sometimes funny. The first waxworks in the novels are Mrs Jarley's in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Nell has never seen a waxwork and she asks Mrs Jarley, "Is it funnier than Punch?" "Funnier!" said Mrs Jarley in a shrill voice. "It is not funny at all. ... It's calm and – what's that word again – critical? – no – classical, that's it – it's calm and classical ... and so like life, that if wax-work only spoke and walked about, you'd hardly know the difference." Waxworks of course are still popular – hence the crowds who visit Madame Tussauds.



'Mrs. Jarley's waxwork.' Illustration by Hablot Browne (Phiz) for *The Old Curiosity Shop*, showing Mrs Jarley instructing Little Nell in her duties.

The waxwork and the corpse come together in Dickens's greatest imaginative creation, at least for my money, Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Miss Havisham sits in the ruins of her bridal gown, beside the great wedding cake with spiders running in and out of it. When Pip first sets eyes on Miss Havisham, this is what he thinks: 'Once I had been taken to see some ghastly waxwork at the fair. Once I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me.'

Death, like corpses, can be funny in Dickens, or deeply pathetic. The pathetic deaths are famous: Joe the crossing sweeper in *Bleak House*, and Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. However, funny deaths are almost as common – such as Jingle's story in *The Pickwick Papers* about the man who commits suicide by sticking his head in a mains water pipe, leaving a full confession in his right boot.

Physical violence, like death and corpses, can also be funny or terrible for Dickens. Either way he finds it irresistible. Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* is his masterpiece of comic violence: a monster, a dwarf with a giant's head. He eats hard-boiled eggs, shells and all. He bites his fork and spoon until they bend. He drinks boiling spirits, bubbling and hissing, straight from the saucepan. He

The grotesque Quilp, illustrated by Hablot Browne (Phiz) for *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

pinches his wife black and blue and bites her. He keeps a huge wooden figurehead of an admiral in his room, and diverts himself by driving red hot pokers through it. In other novels, Quilp's demonic, comic, ferocity becomes serious and tragic. Take the Gordon Rioters in *Barnaby Rudge* as an example. When they set fire to Haredale's house, they seem to go crazy: 'There were men who rushed up to the fire and paddled in it as if in water. On the skull of one drunken lad, who lay on the floor with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, melting his head like wax.'

It is the imaginative excitement of violence that makes Dickens try to get inside the minds of murderers, such as Jonas Chuzzlewit. That wish to get inside the head of a murderer, and feel what it was like to murder, impelled Dickens to include the murder of Nancy by Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist* in his public readings towards the end of his life. He did it against the advice of his friends and his doctors. It was terrifying to watch; audiences were shocked and Dickens was dangerously excited: his pulse went up from 72 to 112 as he performed it.

So we see how ambivalent Dickens is and how he changes from funny to serious about corpses, death and violence. In that respect he was less uncommon than he thought. Seeing the funny side of terrible things was, and still is, very human. It is one of the things that makes him popular. He thought of it as being particular to him – almost as if he were two people and mentally unstable. He thought it was part of what made him an artist. When he left his wife, he wrote to his friend John Forster that it was because of 'the wayward and unsettled feeling which is part (I suppose) of the tenure on which one holds an imaginative life'. So he is wayward and unsettled, being now one kind of person and now quite another.

In the context of violence, although he is fanatical about violence, he is also fanatical about order and legality. Dickens was a great admirer of the police force; he used to join them on their night patrols of thieves' dens and brothels. He enjoyed the firm way they dealt with offenders. Inspector Field of the police was his hero and friend: he becomes Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*. Seeing legality enforced is maybe what drew Dickens to public executions. He was fond of criticising people who went to watch them, but he went to watch them himself out of the same curiosity. He went to see a man guillotined in Rome,



## WHY IS DICKENS SO POPULAR?

he went to see a man beheaded in Switzerland, and went to see the murderer Courvoisier hanged in London. Executions were attractive to him because they satisfied his desires both for violence and for order and legality. They marked a moment where a living human being turns into one of those inanimate likenesses of the human body, like a waxwork, that his imagination was excited by.

You feel this particularly when you read his account of the execution of Mr and Mrs George Manning, who were hanged on the top of Horsemonger Lane Gaol in 1849. Afterwards he comments on the different appearance of the two bodies. The man's, he said, was 'just a limp, loose suit of clothes, as if the man had gone out of them'. But the woman's was 'a fine shape, so elaborately corseted and artfully dressed that it was quite unchanged in its trim appearance as it slowly swung from side to side'. So Mrs George Manning, on whom Dickens based Mademoiselle Hortense, Lady Dedlock's maid in *Bleak House*, becomes with the aid of her corsetry an intriguing human shape – like those that people still flock to see at Madame Tussauds.

---

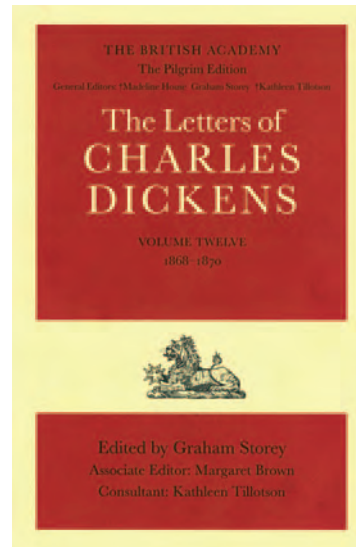
Charles Dickens was born on 7 February 1812. On 8 February 2012 at the British Academy, Professor Carey discussed the question 'Why Dickens?' with Dr Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, Fellow and Tutor in English, Magdalen College, Oxford. Audio recordings of the full conversation can be found via [www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/](http://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2012/)

---

---

John Carey is  
Emeritus Professor of  
English Literature,  
University of Oxford,  
and a Fellow of the  
British Academy.

---



*A major British Academy Research Project, completed in 2002, produced a definitive 12-volume edition of 'The Letters of Charles Dickens'.*