

**GREAT
CHARACTERS
OF FICTION**

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Great characters of fiction by M. E. Townsend

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M. E. TOWNSEND

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OF FICTION**

Great Characters of Fiction.

EDITED BY
M. E. TOWNSEND.

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Preamble.

IN such an age as the present, when the craving for novels and tales of all kinds is constantly on the increase, and apparently almost insatiable, it seems as if it may be useful to present the subject of fiction in a new and different light—as a profitable study rather than as a mere indulgence wherewith to while away an idle hour.

The love of fiction is rooted in the human soul: witness the child's eager petition, 'Tell me a story;' witness the power of the minstrel bard, the improvisatore, the story-teller in all ages; witness the romances, the legends, and the tales of folk-lore surviving in all countries ever since the childhood of the world; witness the immortal power of such books as the *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and the *Arabian Nights*, which hold their own from generation to generation. Stories—true or fictitious—always have been, and always will be, of universal interest, because they appeal to our humanity, to those deeper

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thoughts and emotions, common to us all, which go to make up the drama of human life ; and if they have been wrought with that ‘touch of nature which makes the whole world kin,’ they will live and speak and teach their lessons when other books have to rest silent on their shelves.

It is in vain to tell people not to read fiction—the young will read it because they are young, and on the look-out for amusement ; the old will read it because it makes them feel young again, because it brings back ‘the glory and the dream’ of former years, and makes their hearts thrill once more with the memories of love and sorrow ; the weary and the hard-worked will read it because it rests them, and diverts their minds from the worries of life by plunging them into the absorbing interests of a new and brighter world.

But it is not in vain so to cultivate the taste, the judgment, and the refinement of thoughtful readers, as that they will learn to ‘refuse the evil and choose the good’ in fiction as in other things ; not in vain to teach them to appreciate the beauty of style in such great masters of the art as Scott or Dickens or Thackeray, so that they may not care to read vulgar

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or ill-written books; not in vain to show them how fiction may be used for noble ends—to stir the heart to such sacrifices as were made by an Esmond or a Jeanie Deans, or to rouse the world to take up the cause of the oppressed, as when *Uncle Tom's Cabin* went forth, from the pen of a woman, as the deliverer of the slave and at the same time preached the good news of the Gospel to many who could have been reached by no other means.

What we need to do is to cultivate the critical faculty, and induce those who have come to the age of discretion to study that which is best in fiction, as well as in other literature, so that they may not be able to tolerate the silly trash which so many of them are now devouring, and a taste for which too often leads on to that insidious poison which through the very cheapness and rapid spread of literature is now being introduced amongst us. At the same time, we would urge upon readers of any kind of fiction to study the excellent warning of Professor Ruskin as to what he quaintly calls 'the sore temptation of novel-reading':—

'It is not the badness of a novel that we should dread, so much as its overwrought interest. The weakest romance

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is not so stupefying as the lower forms of religious exciting literature, and the worst romance is not so corrupting as false history, false philosophy, or false political essays. But the best romance becomes dangerous if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act.'

Our aim, then, in collecting this series of papers is to show the true uses of fiction by promoting a taste for the best and noblest kinds of it, and our plan has been to give, as it were, a portrait of the principal character presented in each standard novel or tale selected—a portrait painted with such careful and delicate touches as may cause it to stand out before our readers sufficiently to induce them to study the work for themselves, without telling enough of the story to spoil its interest if, perchance, they are not already acquainted with it.

And, in following out this plan, we strike another chord which generally finds a quick response in the popular mind—that of hero-worship. So strongly, indeed, is this worship ingrained in human hearts, that even the heroes of fiction come in for their share of it.