

Charles Dickens' London

ENGL-L 369 Course Description

Summer 2020



Charles Dickens is not only arguably the single greatest British novelist of all time, but is also the preeminent author of Victorian London. One historian has recently observed that “Dickens would describe all of [London's] qualities as though no one had ever seen them before. And [afterward] no one would be able to see them again except through his eyes.” This course will offer the thrilling opportunity to see London through Dickens’ eyes—and to read Dickens’ writings through the lens provided by on-site explorations of the city. Dickens started his career as a journalist in London and spent most of his life in the city, walking its streets for miles upon miles with ferocious energy, and he wove the sights, sounds and smells of London deeply into the fabric of his novels. Dickens’ own “inimitable” novels (he was nicknamed “the Great Inimitable”) do not simply depict or respond to the rapid transformations within London in this period, they in many ways model themselves on the city, aiming to mimic and evoke the sense London offered of a dizzying profusion, a bewildering collection of interlocking systems, a vast collection of people, “characters,” and classes, and an unending richness of sensations.

In this course, we will read one of Dickens’ greatest, major novels (*Bleak House* of 1852-3) along with a range of shorter texts, both literary and journalistic, by him. Over three weeks in London, we will meet for daily class sessions and a series of outings to some of the most important sites in London that are especially relevant to Dickens and to the texts we’ll be reading, including the Dickens House Museum, his first real home with his wife Catherine, where he wrote some of his earlier novels; the East End neighborhoods that contained some of the worst and most crime-filled slums of the city; The Court of Chancery at Lincoln’s Inn, for a glimpse into the Victorian legal world, and Westminster Abbey, to see the Poet’s Corner where Dickens is buried. We will also take two out-of-town day trips outside of London—to

Oxford and to Portsmouth, Dickens' birthplace. We'll ponder and analyze Dickens' work and its relation to a sense of place and to the modern Victorian city, in relation to issues of literary form and style, realism, the development of mystery and detection as major literary modes, and the representation of gender, sexuality, Englishness, and class and poverty. And even more broadly, we'll be considering Dickens' writings as a test case of the response of modern literature, and of the form of the novel specifically, to an emerging urban, industrial modernity. Coursework will include a substantial amount of reading, daily in-class writing, and a longer final paper (the latter due after our return to the U.S.), all of which will draw on our explorations of London and beyond.

For any questions, feel free to contact Professor Ivan Kreilkamp: ikreilka@indiana.edu