5: Dickens in America

A. Transatlantic Visitors

1. Class title 1 (RMS Britannic)
2. Section title A (*The Inward-bound Liverpool Barque, 1840*)

On thing I have found difficult in preparing this course is that, while I can find a lot written by the British about Britain, and by Americans about America, there are very few books that treat the two countries in parallel, and all too few that look at one from the point of view of the other. So it seemed particlarly valuable to devote a class to a visit to America by one highly-regarded Englishman, who then went home and wrote about his experiences: **Charles Dickens** (1812–70). We shall be talking mainly about his first visit, in 1842. But he returned in 1867, and found things much changed—for the better. By talking about a writer, I also hope to get in something about the state of literature in the two countries; I shall have a similar class for music later.

3. Dickens' American Travels, January to June, 1942

But Dickens wasn't the first to cross the Atlantic and write about what he or she saw. **Frances Trollope** (1779–1863), the mother of the novelist, emigrated in 1827; but her attempts to earn a living over here failed, and she returned four years later, publishing *Domestic Manners of the Americans* in 1832, which was a great success, and opened her to a subsequent career as a writer. A little earlier than that, **James Fenimore Cooper** (1789–1851), who was already a successful novelist, visited England in 1826, 1828, and 1833, publishing his book *Gleanings in Europe; England* in 1837. So let's do a comparison. I have taken short paragraphs from each of the two books, arbitrarily our two countries *Blueland* and *Violetland* (or the other way around), so you can guess which is which.

4. **COMPARISON 1**: quotations (altered) from Trollope and Cooper

After you have worked these out, which I imagine will be fairly easy, I have one further question: is either observation still true today? Perhaps because I also am biased, I still recognize what Mrs. Trollope is saying; belief in the unique virtues of America is almost as important a sign of allegiance as reciting the pledge; this is probably the reason that I have always held back from becoming a citizen, although I have taken the first steps several times. On the other hand, so much has changed in British society, and its dependence on America, that this particular objection of Cooper's no longer reads entirely true, although I am quite prepared to admit to many of his other criticisms.

5. Cooper: Arriving in England
6. Cooper: Farewell to England

Let me give you a little more of each of these two writers. Here is **Cooper** arriving in Dover from France, and then bidding England farewell. He was already rather well-known when he came over, and was entertained by nobility; much of his condemnation has to do with the unproportional power of the landed gentry, not only in the House of Lords but also in the so-called Commons, most of whose members at the time were either the sons of lords, or rich men with landed interests. **Frances Trollope**, on the other hand, was not yet famous. She entered the US via New Orleans, then traveled up to Mississippi to a utopian community for freed slaves in Tennessee, but found the conditions pretty primitive. She was hard up for money and unhappy in her marriage, and she was appalled by the roughness of behavior, the constant chewing and spitting of tobacco, and the grip of Evangelicalism. On the other hand, she could appreciate beauty when she saw it, as on this trip down the Hudson from Albany to New York, just before her departure.

7. Trollope: Sailing down the Hudson
8. Trollope: Farewell to America

B. The Dickens Phenomenon

9. Section title B (*Nicholas Nickleby*)

Dickens was not yet 29 when he arrived in America in 1842, but he was treated like a rock star. This is because at least four of the novels he had written by that time—*The Pickwick Papers* (1837), *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841)—has been sold in weekly instalments, building up an increasing readership in each country with each issue. The take-off in sales of *The Pickwick Papers*, not to mention the side merchandise such as playing cards and figurines of its popular characters such as the perpetual optimist **Sam Weller**, was known as the **Sam Weller Bump**.

10. *Paris Review* on the Sam Weller Bump, with Royal Doulton figurine of Weller

Most of the rest of this class will be outsourced through videos; they should be fun, though. I thought it would be good to try to establish some of the qualities of Dickens' writing by showing some scenes from one of the novels I mentioned, ***Nicholas Nickleby***. I chose this partly because the 9-hour stage adaptation by the Royal Shakespeare Company is one of the greatest theatrical experiences I have ever attended, and because the script by **David Edgar** (1948–) stays true to the author by having the actors speak his descriptive writing in between performing his dialogue. So, for example, in the first scene we shall watch, Dickens starts his description of the sadistic schoolmaster **Wackford Squeers** (he had a genius for names), with a brilliant throwaway line: "*Mr. Squeers's appearance was not prepossessing. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two*." But David Edgar is not going to throw it away; he simply has two secondary actors introduce the scene. You will see this technique cropping up all the way through.

11. In what genres did Dickens write?

I am going to show you five scenes as an extended comparison. I'll give you a brief plot introduction to each, but not otherwise discuss them. As you watch, I invite you to note down the **genre** of each: melodrama, tragedy, comedy, realism, sentiment, whatever—and we'll compare notes at the end.

A. When his father dies, **Nicholas**, his mother, and his sister **Kate** are thrown upon the offices of their relative **Ralph Nickleby** in London, a hard-headed businessman who wants little to do with them. He finds Nicholas a job at **Dothebys Hall**, a private school far from London run by the sadistic **Wackford Squeers** (**Alun Armstrong**).

12. **COMPARISON 2a**: Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby,* first appearance of Squeers

B. Squeers has an equally horrible wife, a fat bully of a son, and an unprepossessing daughter called **Fanny** (**Suzanne Bertish**). She sets her cap at Nicholas, and when he ignores her to flirt with her pretty friend **Tilda Price** (**Cathryn Harrison**), who is already engaged to someone else, she becomes vindictive. This scene takes place the next day.

13. **COMPARISON 2b**: Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby,* Fanny Squeers and Tilda Price

C. Squeers sadistically maltreats all his paying pupils, but he reserves the worst for the poor disabled simpleton **Smike** (**David Threlfall**). In this scene, Smike has been recaptured after running away, and is to be publicly flogged. But this is too much for **Nicholas** (**Roger Rees**), who gives Squeers a taste of his own medicine.

14. **COMPARISON 2c**: Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby,* Nicholas beats Smike

D. We are now nearing the end, and things are looking bad for Nicholas, and for the two women he loves (his sister and another), both victims of exploitative men. This scene describes a London dawn.

15. **COMPARISON 2d**: Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby,* dawn chorus

E. When Nicholas rescued Smike from the beating and left Dotheboys Hall, he remained in close touch with him for the rest of the novel. This includes a stint with a second-rate touring theatrical company, with which Nicholas appears as **Romeo** and Smike is cast in the brief role of the **Apothecary**. But Smike is sick with consumption, and even a removal to the Nicklebys' old home in the country cannot cure him. Delirious and close to death, he imagines playing the scene again with Nicholas, watched by Kate (**Emily Richard**), whom he has always loved from a distance.

16. **COMPARISON 2e**: Dickens: *Nicholas Nickleby,* death of Smike

17. All five scenes

So what did we think? A few are obvious. Clip B with the two women is obviously **comedy**. Clip C is intense **drama**, with nothing comic about it at all. Clip E is, maybe not tragedy, but certainly tear-jerking **pathos**. But what about Clip A? Its medium is comedy, but that doesn't make Squeers any less horrible. Or the dawn chorus, Clip D? That is interesting. It shows Dickens' passion as a **social activist**, dealing

with the real-life conditions of the London poor. Yet the technique, even in written form, is not realistic at all, but a deliberately artifical set-piece of writing. You get such things occasionally in all his novels.

18. Little Nell

Dickens loved death scenes. It is said, probably apochryphally, that Dickens' American public was so anxious to know what happened to **Little Nell**, the longsuffering angelic child heroine of *The Old Curiosity Shop* that they mobbed the New York dock of the ship carrying the final installment. But of course she is too much the innocent victim not to die. **Oscar Wilde** wrote of this scene; "*one must have a heart of stone to read the death of little Nell without laughing*." Ouch! In fact, though, Dickens treats the death very sensitively, in another room, offstage. What Wilde was objecting to is probably the impossible goodness of the character. Nell features in only full-length statue of Dickens in America (in a suburban park in Philadelphia)—and that takes me to the final section of this class.

C. Toast of America

19. Section title B (*Nicholas Nickleby*)
20. Margolyes: *Dickens in America*, opening
21. Map of Dickens' visit

The character actress **Miriam Margolyes**, an exact contemporary of mine at Cambridge, did a ten-part series for the BBC in 2005, tracing Dickens' visit to America in 1842, one hour for each of the chapters in his account of the journey *American Notes.* The series tends to be as much about *her* as about Dickens, which I rather regret, but it is interesting nonetheless. I have strung together two sets of excerpts. In the first, partly as a follow-up to last week's class, we have his/her visit to the **Lowell Mills** in Massachusetts, the great **Boz Ball** set up in his honor in New York, **and his visit to the Eastern State Penetentiary** outside Philadelphia, which was clearly a horrific experience for both of them.

22. Margolyes: *Dickens in America*, Lowell, NYC, Philadelphia
23. Map of Dickens' visit (repeat)

From then on, Dickens' impressions of this country were more mixed. He went to Richmond to examine slavery at first hand, but he wasn't permitted to visit with the slaves, and the BBC film also has disappointingly little. He went West to St. Louis, then North via Niagara (which wowed him) into Canada. We'll pick him up in his last few days, with a very brief quote about the beauty of the Hudson—very similar to Mrs. Trollope's—and his return to New York. Before she leaves, Miriam Margolyes gives a talk in which she sums up her impressions of the trip. The program intercuts this with an interview with Emeritus Professor **Bert Hornback**, who clearly shares Miriam's left-wing views (this was filmed during the run-up to the Second Iraq War), and some moments with her on her own. I hope the combination makes sense.

24. Margolyes: *Dickens in America*, talk in New York
25. Class title 2 (Through British Eyes)

D. Poetic Variations

26. Section title D (all four poets in this section)

Dickens was an urban realist whose characters range from drudge to Duchess, and whose could combine all genres from comedy to heartbreaking pathos. He not quite unique among the British novelists of his time: **Thackeray** shared many of these qualities, as would **Anthony Trollope** a generation later. But he was virtually unmatched among American ones. **Harriet Beecher Stowe's** Uncle Tom's Cabin is Dickensian in terms of its narrative and moral commitment, but I can think of no major novelists almost throughout the century who would write about the life of cities, and not until **Mark Twain** do we get an American with the same ability to use comedy to serious effect. But if we isolate just one of Dickens' qualities, his **fascination with darkness**, then he has close rivals in **Poe**, **Hawthorne**, and **Melville**, to name but three. I will end the class with four of five examples of such darkness, from both sides of the Atlantic. But as that presentation will be through vieo clips and thus largely passive, I want first to get you involved again with a couple of poem comparisons for us to discuss.

27. **COMPARISON 3a**: Cary and Meredith

The Nineteenth Century, like most others, is crammed with romantic poems about love. But poems which deliberately go against the convention are few and far between. I think I used *The Bridal Veil* (1866) by American poet **Alice Cary** (1820–71) in my course on women last semester, but it can bear my reading it again. And I know I have quoted the first sonnet of *Modern Love* (1862) by British author **George Meredith** (1828–1909) before, but I am using a different stanza now, and in a rather good video.

28. **COMPARISON 3b**: Alice Cary: *The Bridal Veil*
29. **COMPARISON 3c**: George Meredith: *Modern Love,* stanza 17 (read by Iain Batchelor)
30. **COMPARISON 3d**: both poems

So: two poems about marriage, from roughly the same date. <u>Who is the speaker in each case</u>? <u>What is the situation</u>? <u>What prognosis would you give for the marriage</u>?

31. **COMPARISON 4a**: Poe and Tennyson

Another kind of poem that crops up frequently in the Nineteenth Century is the **elegy**; the *Oxford Book of English Verse* is full of them. They are less common in American literature, but they exist here too; *Thanatopsis* by **William Cullen Bryant** is a well-known example. The particular Victorian flavor is not mourning over people who have already died, but the musing of someone approaching the end of life. These poems by **Edgar Allan Poe** (1809–49) and **Alfred Lord Tennyson** (1809–92) are quite different in form; one is short and simple, the other long and complex; we can only hear the last third of it. I have professional readings of both of them. <u>See what you think</u>.

32. **COMPARISON 4b:** Edgar Allan Poe: *Eldorado* (read by Seth Hunter Perkins)
33. **COMPARISON 4c:** Tennyson: *Ulysses,* ending (read by Tom O'Bedlam)
34. **COMPARISON 4d:** Poe text
35. **COMPARISON 4e:** Tennyson text

What did you think? What style has Poe chosen for his poem, and why? Tennyson avoids rhyme; does this diminish his poetic quality? How does each poet use the idea of myth and legend? Does this make one more accessible than the other? Which one makes you think more deeply? As you see, both poets were born in the same year, but Tennyson lived much longer. Towards the end of his life, he wrote poems more clearly anticipating death; the best known is probably *Crossing the Bar* (1889):

Sunset and evening star,
And one clear call for me!
And may there be no moaning at the bar,
When I put out to sea.

Although *Ulysses* was not published until 1842, he actually wrote in in 1833, which really amazes me. It is hard to imagine a young man of 25 thinking himself into the mind of an aging hero. But then so much of Tennyson's poetry is in the elegaic vein. I just didn't know he started so young!

E. Out of the Darkness

36. Section title E (Quidor: *The Headless Horseman*)

This is a painting by the minor artist **John Quidor** (1801–81), who mostly illustrated works by **Washington Irving** (1783–1859); this is *The Headless Horseman Pursuing Ichabod Crane*, from Irving's *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820). Irving was one of the writers whom Dickens met on his trip, and I had meant to have included something by him, but really the video I thought of showing adds very little to this picture. So I'll leave it at that, with the comment that even in the early years of the Nineteenth Century, American authors had the ghost story pretty much down. But it gives me a start for my gallery of film clips to end this hour, all having to do with this **fascination with darkness** that you certainly get in Dickens, and which is a recurrent factor in American fiction of the Nineteenth Century. The five clips I shall show have things in common, I don't think we'll have time to make them a formal comparison, but all the same I'll take comments and questions from the comment box.

37. Hawthorne: *Rappacini's Daughter*, title

Well before writing *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), **Nathaniel Hawthorne** (1804–64) was publishing short stories, several of which he gathered together into a book as *Twice-Told Tales* in 1844. One of these was *Rappaccini's Daughter*, about a scientist in the Italian Renaissance, who creates a walled garden full of poisonous plants. So that his daughter **Beatrice** shall not be harmed by them, he gradually inoculates her with the poison. But this makes her poisonous to everybody else, so when he finds a perfect mate for her, a young man called Giovanni, he inoculates him too without his knowledge, so that he can

withstand her kiss. But Giovanni's mentor, when he learns what has happened, gives him an antidote that he has tested in the laboratory only, that he *hopes* will neutralize the poison in both of them…. This is the end of the story in a 1963 movie starring **Vincent Price**, **Brett Halsey**, and **Joyce Taylor**.

38. Hawthorne: *Rappacini's Daughter*, ending
39. Hawthorne: *Rappacini's Daughter*, title (repeat)

Is that just a horror story, or is there something more? Rappacini strikes me as a God creating a perfect Eden, peopled with his own Eve and Adam. It seems to me that the story is about obsessive **megalomania** on the one hand, and the vulnerability of **innocence** on the other: themes that he would take up again in *The Scarlet Letter*, which is about the fall from innocence in a Puritan-created Eden. When he moved in next to the older author in 1850, **Herman Melville** (1819–91) had a completed draft of *Moby-Dick* that read like a more-or-less-normal sea yarn; it did not even include the character of the megalomaniac Captain Ahab. But Melville spotted a "darkness" [his term] in Hawthorne that others did not see, and over the next year completely rewrote his book to become the apocalyptic saga that it is.

40. Poe: *The Tell-Tale Heart*

Edgar Allan Poe became even more famous as a short-story writer than as a poet. At the same time as Hawthorne was writing *Rappaccini's Daughter,* Poe published *The Tell-Tale Heart.* It is about a man who, before the story begins, conceives the perfect murder: killing a virtual stranger, cutting up his body, and concealing the severed limbs under the floorboards. But he gives himself away to a visitor when he becomes torment by the sound of the dead man's heart still beating under the floor. Here is part of it; **Vincent Price** once again, in a solo turn.

41. Poe: *The Tell-Tale Heart,* excerpt
42. Stevenson: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* poster

What makes the Poe so effective, I think, is the fact that the character is not haunted by something outside himself, but by his own guilt. Increasingly in the second half of the century, authors became fascinated by the idea that there is a dark side within each of us. The iconic statement of the theme, though, is not American by British: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by the Scottish author **Robert Louis Stevenson** (1850–94). Jekyll is another mad scientist aiming at total control of human personality. He experiments on himself, but what he does not realize is the the *alter-ego* released by his potion is a psychopathic murder whose crimes he reads about in the paper without realizing that he himself has committed them. Here is the first transformation scene in the 1920 silent film with **John Barrymore**; I found the quasi-Victorian steampunk music myself.

43. Stevenson: *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde,* transformation scene (John Barrymore)
44. Melville: *Billy Budd* cover

That was the only British example in this final group, but the other two have got strong British connections: the **Henry James** *Turn of the Screw* with which I shall end because he moved there, and the late **Melville** *Billy Budd* because it is set on a British man-o-war on which the title character, a captured American seaman, has been impressed. Melville subtitles this book, which was published posthumously,

"an inside narrative," meaning that what interested him was what went on inside each of his main characters, especially on the psychological and moral plane.

45. Melville: *Billy Budd,* excerpt from Chapter 12

One of these characters is as close to a study in pure Evil as you are likely to get in a novel written before our own times. This is the Master-at-Arms **John Claggart**, clearly an intelligent man trapped in some psychic prison of his own making. **Billy Budd** is everything that he is not: young, blonde, open-hearted, and entirely innocent. For Claggart, his very presence is an existential challenge; Billy must be destroyed. He does this by getting one of his minions to fake evidence to frame Billy on a charge of sedition. The Captain, who has become fond of Billy (homosexual implications lie half-buried throughout the story), asks the boy to speak for himself, but the lad has a stress-induced stammer and can't get the words out. I am going to show this scene in the 1962 film directed by **Peter Ustinov**, who plays the Captain; **Robert Ryan** is Claggart and **Terence Stamp** is Billy. But a film cannot break away from the action to give us Melville's "inside narrative"; the character has to be built up over time; so this scene, good though it is, will seem to lack a dimension.

46. Melville: *Billy Budd,* Billy kills Claggart
47. James: *The Turn of the Screw,* title slide

I don't know why it is, but directors of the sixties seemed to chose black-and-white when filming serious literary properties—perhaps to disassociate themselves from Hollywood glitz. But the camerawork in **Jack Clayton's** *The Innocents*, his 1961 version of *The Turn of the Screw* by **Henry James** (1843–1916), is absolutely superb, asis the acting of his star, **Deborah Kerr**. The situation is this: an inexperienced young **Governess**, never named, is hired by a rich employer to look after his two wards in an old house in the country, taking all the responsibility herself and not to bother him. Infatuated with her employer, she accepts, but soon becomes convinced that the children are enthralled by the ghosts of the former Governess and Valet, both of whom are dead. Again there are implications of pedophilia between the valet **Peter Quint** and the boy **Miles**, but the Governess would not know how to put it into words. In the end, she corners Miles, and forces him to acknowledge the association.

Now on the surface, this would seem to return us to the *Headless Horseman*, with an external supernatural figure preying on a real one. But the thing about *The Turn of the Screw* is that we never get any *objective* evidence of the existence of the ghosts; they may all be in the Governess's mind. So who is putting the screws on Miles at the end—Peter Quint, or the Governess herself?

48. James: *The Turn of the Screw* (*The Innocents*), final scene
49. Class title 3 (Transatlantic Encounters)