

TRANSATLANTIC IDENTITIES



5. DICKENS IN AMERICA

October 18, 2023

DICKENS IN AMERICA

IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY, a small number of literary travelers crossed the Atlantic in either direction, to write books on their return describing what they saw. One of these was Charles Dickens, who arrived in Boston in January 1842 a few days shy of his 29th birthday. Already a publishing phenomenon at home, he was hailed in America like a rock star. We look at the reasons for his success in Britain, then retrace his steps in the US with the help of actress Miriam Margolyes.

In the second hour, we look at some poetry from each country, and sample videos based on novellas or short stories. Although there were few writers in Britain close to Dickens in style or subject, and virtually none in America, we can get somewhere by focusing on one particular Dickensian quality that would become something of an American specialty: his fascination with the dark side of the human psyche. *rb.*

A. TRANSATLANTIC VISITORS

A brief look at the travel writing of **James Fenimore Cooper**, who visited England several times between 1826 and 1833, and **Fanny Trollope** (mother of the future novelist), who was in America from 1827 to 1831. Neither was entirely positive about their experience.

COMPARISON: Two transatlantic visitors

Cooper: *Gleanings in Europe: England* (1837, excerpts)

Trollope: *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832, excerpts)

B. THE DICKENS PHENOMENON

We look at some of the reasons for Dickens's fame, with particular reference to his 1839 novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, in the 1980 dramatization for the Royal Shakespeare Company by **David Edgar**.

COMPARISON: Five scenes from *Nicholas Nickleby*

- ♪ **Excerpt 1:** Nicholas' employer, schoolmaster Wackford Squeers
Alun Armstrong
- ♪ **Excerpt 2:** Fanny Squeers and Tilda Price
Suzanne Bertish, Cathryn Harrison
- ♪ **Excerpt 3:** Nicholas rescues Smike from a flogging by Squeers,
Roger Reese, David Threlfall, Alun Armstrong
- ♪ **Excerpt 4:** The streets of London at dawn
- ♪ **Excerpt 5:** Nicholas and his sister Kate give comfort to Smike
Roger Rees, Emily Richard, David Threlfall

C. TOAST OF AMERICA

Excerpts from the 2005 BBC television series *Dickens in America*, in which character actress **Miriam Margolyes** retraces the author's steps, talks to experts, and makes some observations of her own.

- ♪ **Introduction:** Miriam explains the project
- ♪ **First stops:** Lowell, New York, and Philadelphia
- ♪ **Last stop:** Miriam interviews Bert Hornback and sums up

D. POETIC VARIATIONS

Two comparisons between American and British poets treating common subjects for their time—the love poem and the elegy—in quite uncommon ways.

COMPARISON: Two poems about marriage

- Alice Cary: *The Bridal Veil* (1866)
- ♪ **Meredith:** *Modern Love XVII* (1862, Iain Batchelor)

COMPARISON: Two poems about age

- ♪ **Poe:** *Eldorado* (1849, Seth Hunter Perkins)
- ♪ **Tennyson:** *Ulysses*, ending (1842, Tom O'Bedlam)

E. OUT OF THE DARKNESS

Five videos based on novellas or short stories that share a preoccupation with the dark side of life.

Quidor: *Ichabod Crane and the Headless Horseman* (1858)

- ♪ **Hawthorne:** *Rappacini's Daughter* (1843), ending
Vincent Price, Brett Halsey, and Joyce Taylor
- ♪ **Poe:** *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), excerpt
Vincent Price
- ♪ **Stevenson:** *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), transformation scene
John Barrymore in 1920 silent film
- ♪ **Melville:** *Billy Budd* (1891), Claggart accuses Billy to the Captain
Robert Ryan, Terence Stamp, Peter Ustinov in 1962 film
- ♪ **James:** *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), ending
Debra Kerr in Jack Clayton's 1960 film *The Innocents*

Alice **Cary** (1820–71, *American poet*), James Fenimore **Cooper** (1789–1851, *American writer*), Charles **Dickens** (1812–70, *English writer*), David **Edgar** (1948–, *English playwright*), Nathaniel **Hawthorne** (1804–64, *American writer*), Washington **Irving** (1783–1859, *American writer*), Henry **James** (1843–1916, *American novelist*), Herman **Melville** (1819–91, *American writer*), George **Meredith** (1828–1909, *English poet*), Edgar Allan **Poe** (1809–49, *American writer*), John **Quidor** (1801–81, *American painter*), Robert Louis **Stevenson** (1850–94, *Scottish writer*), Alfred Lord **Tennyson** (1809–92, *English poet*), Frances **Trollope** (1779–1863, *English writer*)

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