

Dickens in America and America on/in Dickens: Framing the “Transatlantic” and a Major Figure



Welcome to our team-taught class on transatlantic print culture in the long nineteenth century. You’ll see that we’ve attached the syllabus, which we hope you’ll review before our first meeting. Below we’ll provide some context to support your reading for the first session. (Note that the items listed on any given date on the syllabus represent work you should have completed before coming to class, as preparation for a productive collaborative session of the seminar each week.) Once we email these weekly guides to reading we’ll also post them on eCollege so that you always have access to them.

Readings for our first session will include a review of major scholarship in transatlantic studies and an example of how the cultural movement—and scholarship about it—often focuses on key personalities who themselves crossed the Atlantic.

One pair of readings come from draft chapters being prepared for *Teaching Transatlanticism*, a collection of essays currently under contract with Edinburgh University Press and being co-edited by your very own instructors, Drs. Hughes and Robbins. From that set of essays, we invite you to read our co-authored introduction and a piece by Susan Griffin, who reflects back on how experiences in her past student and teaching experiences have shaped her scholarly identity and her work in the field.

We very much hope that in bringing fresh eyes to our introduction, you’ll make suggestions and raise questions about our draft. (If you prefer, you can email comments and suggestions to Ph.D. student Marie Martinez, an alumna of our 2010 transatlantic seminar and member of our “Teaching Transatlanticism” website team. She will post or pass along your comments without revealing your identity.)

We also hope that you’ll find the review of scholarship embedded within our introduction provides a helpful survey of the field’s history and ongoing development—themes taken up in personal terms, as we note above, in Griffin’s companion essay. As you read, please ask yourself what issues seem most crucial to the field today, whether for research or for teaching, and consider what aspects of the enterprise appear to be productive, as well as what’s challenging.

Like Griffin, you should consider ways your own past experiences in literary and cultural studies are likely to enable and/or constrain your own process of entering this complex intellectual field.

You'll find the Hughes/Robbins introduction and Susan Griffin's memoir-like reflective essay online in the digital workspace we'll be using throughout the course to connect you to our book project:

<http://transatlanticconversationsworkspace.wordpress.com/>

and, more specifically, here:

<http://transatlanticconversationsworkspace.wordpress.com/chapters/>

The website is password-protected—though with a perhaps predictable password: transatlantic. Go to the chapters section to read (and, we hope, write brief global responses to) those two essays.

Also on the secondary scholarship front, we're asking you to read two strong models of influential transatlantic scholarship—a chapter from Meredith McGill's book and an essay by Amanda Claybough. Their chapter and journal article can help us begin to think how transatlanticism might be conceptualized in intellectual, cultural, theoretical, and literary terms. Because you cannot access McGill's chapter on eCollege until the opening day of classes, we have also attached that reading.

Claiming rightful “first-week” position in our reading of primary materials is Charles Dickens, complemented by a brief look at Twain on the American side. We pair them in part because both were highly successful lecturers traveling outside their own countries to augment their professional incomes with highly popular public appearances. Certainly both Dickens and Twain remain important presences in academic scholarship and in popular culture.

Dickens in America and America on/in Dickens

Background:

In these readings, you will be encountering a Dickens very different from the author of *A Christmas Carol* or the author of complex, sometimes dark, sometimes comic novels of the modern city.

This alternative Dickens, though, may suggest yet another reason to see what happens when authors enjoying a privileged place within a nationalist literary tradition are repositioned within a transatlantic framework. Besides modeling effective approaches for doing transatlantic scholarship more generally, taken together the McGill and Claybough readings should give you the background you need to comprehend the excerpts from *American Notes* (1842).

American Notes

You may be surprised to learn that Dickens's wife Catherine accompanied him throughout his travels in the U.S. and played a part in all important social functions during their visit, since she is generally invisible in the text. Michael Slater, the distinguished Dickens scholar who's produced the most recent biography (*Charles Dickens* [New Haven: Yale UP, 2009]), comments that America's democratic experiment excited greater curiosity in Britain after Parliament passed its first Reform Bill in 1832, which widened parliamentary representation and, ever so slightly, expanded the male franchise. Dickens arrived in the country a staunch abolitionist and something of a political radical. At first his trip was a sensational success: crowds turned out to see and cheer him, and he was feted in Boston and New York. Washington Irving (an important influence on the "Mr. Fezziwig" section of *A Christmas Carol*) held a dinner in Dickens's honor. In Boston the British celebrity formed a friendship with Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who soon after Dickens's return to Britain was a guest in the Dickens London home for two weeks. Dickens also twice met with Edgar Allan Poe for lengthy interviews in Philadelphia.

But two factors jaundiced Dickens's outlook on America. First and foremost, he came to America determined to make a case for implementing international copyright, and he was taken aback when Americans, and especially the American press, attacked him for exploiting the welcome granted to him to seek greater profits as an author. As the *New York Courier* commented, it was a mistake to "intrude his business upon those who assemble to do homage to his genius" (qtd. by Slater 182). Second, although Dickens routinely wrote sketches of others and was secretly contracted to write a book on America before he set foot in the New World, he was highly incensed by some of the sketches of himself in American newspapers. Slater speculates that as an Englishman Dickens could never rid himself of class consciousness and so was especially stung by comments that connoted down-market class standing in Dickens, as in the *Worcester [Mass.] Aegis*: "We found a middle sized person, in a brown frock coat, a red figured vest, somewhat of the flash order, and a fancy scarf cravat, that concealed the dickey, and was fastened to the bosom in rather voluminous folds by a double pin and chain" (qtd. by Slater 181). Ultimately Dickens wrote to his friend, actor Charles Macready, on 22 March 1842, "This is not the Republic I came to see. This is not the Republic of my imagination." Dickens returned to England a more confirmed advocate of constitutional monarchy.

Slater finds no evidence that Dickens had read Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, even though Tocqueville reported, as did *American Notes*, that Americans were notoriously sensitive to criticism of their country. Instead Slater thinks that Dickens's travel account was in conversation with Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (a work in Dickens's library), from which we'll be reading excerpts in a few weeks. As might be expected, many American readers were incensed by Dickens's comments. But America, so to speak, had the last laugh. While Dickens was pleased that *American Notes* sold 3,000 copies in England in 2 days,

in America the *New York Herald* pirated the book and sold 50,000 copies in 2 days. (The details above are drawn from Slater, pp. 175-206.)

Perils of Certain English Prisoners

This story was written collaboratively by Dickens (who authored chapters 1 and 3) and Wilkie Collins (who contributed chapter 2) as a Christmas tale for Dickens's magazine *Household Words*. This story is usually read as a reaction to a crucial event in India: the Indian Rebellion (or as the British termed it, Mutiny) of 1857, when Sepoy soldiers (Indians in the British army) staged an uprising sparked not only by longstanding colonial practices but also by the new greased cartridges associated with the improved technology of rapidly firing guns. The cartridges had to be bitten before loading, and assumptions that either cow fat or pig fat had been used posed the dilemma of violations of religious practices for Hindus and Muslims. In the process of the Rebellion some British women and children were killed by Indian forces, especially at Cawnpore.

It is hard to overestimate the shock Britons experienced in reaction, or the violent rhetoric this evoked. A number of stories of sexual ravaging of women circulated at the time (many of them later discounted), and you'll see this reflected in *Perils of Certain English Prisoners* as well. Philip Allingham and George Landow point out that that the Central America setting had plausibility of its own since talk was already beginning to circulate in Britain about the possibility of a Panama Canal (<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/pva354.html>).

You will see some disturbing representation of mixed race characters in Dickens's chapters. Privately, Dickens indulged in virulently aggressive comments about India in the immediate aftermath of the Indian Mutiny. He could at times be overtly racist about other peoples of color. If you care to know more, you can see some of these comments, and also the intriguing argument that in *Perils* Dickens was wrestling with theories of social contract (cp. the contract Marion is ordered to sign) in colonial contexts since contracts could not be enforced or mutually abided by as they could in England, in Alex Tickell's recent essay, "*The Perils of Certain English Prisoners: Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, and the Limits of Colonial Government*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 67.4 (March 2013): 457-489. Tickell, notably, suggests that Dickens's skepticism about contracts issued by colonial governments was influenced by his American travels in 1842, when he learned about eighteenth-century contracts issued by the American colonial government to various Indian tribes in North America.

Twain on Dickens

We bring Twain briefly into the picture for our opening night as a commentator—a role he often played during his lifetime. His satirical stab at those who would seek to profit from any association with Dickens reminds us that the British author did regain star-level popularity in the

U.S.—despite the initial angst elicited by *American Notes*. (As always with Twain, we'll want to bring irony into play: the master performer himself, he critiques others for playing just the kind of role he often took on himself: engaging public lecturer, crossing national boundaries with self-presentations designed in rhetorically strategic ways.)

Discussion Questions:

1. In general, how do the Griffin essay, Hughes/Robbins introduction, McGill chapter, and Claybaugh essay frame the Dickens and Twain readings for you? I.e., what do you see in these primary text readings that you might not otherwise had you not undertaken these secondary readings?
2. If you were reading Dickens in a British context, Twain in an American context, rather than both in a transatlantic context, how might your approach and method differ?
3. The same American newspaper that serialized Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1851-52, the [National Era](#), also serialized *Perils of Certain Prisoners* beginning in its January 21, 1858 issue (in which the story was allotted almost the entire front page). The serialization concluded on February 25. How might the same story signify differently in Dickens's own British magazine and in an American abolitionist magazine?