

Charles Dickens's Bleak House

John Kucich

Course Information

Tuesdays from 1:30–3:30 p.m. for eight weeks beginning March 5 through April 23.

Virtual – Discussion – Maximum 18

Course Description

For thirty-five years in the middle of the Victorian period, Charles Dickens commanded the attention of English-speaking readers like no writer ever had before or since. He is still regarded as one of the greatest British novelists ever—"the Shakespeare of the novel," as the critic F. R. Leavis called him. His phenomenal popularity, built on his ability to please readers of all social classes, in both disparate and unifying ways; his eclecticism of form, tone, and subject matter; his encyclopedic range of social reference; and his extravagant mix of sensationalism, sentiment, comedy, and psychological insight—all have made Dickens seem nothing less than the key to understanding the culture and society of Victorian England.

While readers might prefer one or another of Dickens's novels as their favorite, *Bleak House* (1852-53) is widely considered to be his magnum opus. Written in mid-career, when he was at the height of his literary powers, the novel is epic in scope: it shines a fiercely critical light on various social institutions (the law, philanthropy, policing, organized religion), on social mores and hypocrisies, on the gulf between rich and poor, and on the challenges facing idealistic young men and women trying to better both themselves and their society. It is boldly experimental, employing two quite different narrators—one realistic, publicly oriented, and presumably male, the other romantic, private, and female—to explore different ways of understanding both self and society. Its rhetorical brilliance is delightful and memorable.

Focusing on just one (very long) novel will give us time to "close read" its complexities, which present certain challenges for twenty-first-century readers while yet rewarding careful attention. The range of topics we discuss will be determined partly by the interests of class participants, but it will no doubt be as expansive as the novel itself. We'll also read a few short essays to help focus issues of narrative form and character psychology.

Class will be discussion based, except for a few extended remarks by the instructor.

Please buy the edition listed below. It's important that we all have books with the same page numbers, since we'll want to move rapidly from passage to passage in discussion, while remaining "on the same page."

Reading

This edition is available at Labyrinth Books in Princeton

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008
World Classics Edition, with introduction and notes by Stephen Gill
ISBN 9780199536313

Course Schedule

Weeks	Topics and Reading Assignments
Before Week One	Please read Chapters 1-4 (pp. 11-57)
Week One	Ch. 1-4 (pp. 11-57)
Week Two	Ch. 5-10 (pp. 58-152); Ellen Serlen, "The Two Worlds of <i>Bleak House</i> " (an excerpt, redacted)
Week Three	Ch. 11-16 (pp. 152-244)
Week Four	Ch. 17-25 (pp. 244-384)
Week Five	Ch. 26-35 (pp. 384-526); Brooke D. Taylor, "Spontaneous Combustion: When 'Fact' Confirms Feeling in <i>Bleak House</i> " (redacted)
Week Six	Ch. 36-46 (pp. 526-664); Christopher Herbert, "The Occult in <i>Bleak House</i> " (redacted)
Week Seven	Ch. 47-56 (pp. 664-801); William F. Axton, "The Trouble with Esther" (an excerpt, redacted)
Week Eight	Ch. 57-67 (pp. 801-914)

