Spring 2020 Course Description

Instructor: Mary Ann O'Farrell
Course: ENGL 481
Title: Senior Seminar: Dickens and the Dickensian

Description: This class will take as its subject the popularity of Dickens. If the Victorians loved Dickens's novels, as they manifestly did, what was it they loved, and what does their love tell us about them? What does our culture's continuing attachment to the idea of Dickens say about us? Thinking about orphans, Christmas, disability, sentimentality, romance, destitution, bodies, disease, and death, we will also talk about the role of illustration and serial publication in the history of the novel, about majority and minority of character, about the nineteenth century’s interest in the idea of realism, and about Dickens’s capacity for visualization: what people mean when they suggest, as some do, that Dickens invented the movies. Some part of our attention will turn to the ways our culture continues to refer to Dickens and to what we mean to say when we describe something as Dickensian.

Proposed Readings: We will examine these questions by reading two or three of Dickens’s longer novels and some of his shorter works, using them to think about what the Victorians understood as characteristically "Dickensian" and what we do. Readings will also include critical and scholarly works that will help us contextualize and interpret Dickens. Requirements may include online posts and one or two short papers, one of these about appearances of Dickens in contemporary popular culture; because this is a senior seminar, we will also spend time preparing to write the course’s longer final paper about Dickens, which will combine research with critical thinking and argumentation.