Charles Dickens: Crime and Riot

Short Description: The course takes participants through four major novels by Charles Dickens that span the major stages of his career. In doing so, we will explore two themes that shaped the 19th century: the theme of crime and the criminal underworld (Oliver Twist and Bleak House) and the theme of political upheaval and rebellion (Barnaby Rudge and A Tale of Two Cities).

Long Description: Charles Dickens is the pre-eminent popular writer of the 19th century, second only to Shakespeare in the literary canon for his creation of memorable characters. We’ll survey his amazing achievement by looking at four novels from different periods of his writing career.

From the first period, we’ll look at Oliver Twist (1837-9). Although Oliver Twist is already familiar to everyone from many film, TV, and musical adaptations, it’s a story that has many strange aspects that are often overlooked. Dickens wrote it by instalments and learnt how to put a continuous narrative together as a novel as he wrote, so Oliver is full of unused plot lines and narrative hanging threads that suggest other directions the story could have gone. It’s a fascinating opportunity to look over Dickens’s shoulder and see how he composes as he goes along.

In Dickens’s second period, we will look at one of his most interesting forgotten novels, Barnaby Rudge (1841). Now that Dickens knew how to write a novel, he made a bid for literary respectability by writing what is meant to be a more conventional historical novel. Barnaby Rudge is a tale of the Gordon riots in 1780, a real-life anti-Catholic protest through London which in Dickens’s hands becomes an indictment against the violence of the French Revolution. Barnaby Rudge melds a classical melodramatic plot with a warning about the possibility of violence similar to the French Revolution breaking out in Britain in the 1840s. The novel secured Dickens’s literary appeal and proved that he could write ‘proper’ novels.

For the third period of Dicken’s career, we will look at one of his most famous novels, Bleak House (1852-3). Bleak House is the culmination of the series of complex family melodramas that revolve around institutions in English society that he started writing after Barnaby Rudge. Bleak House focuses on the three ‘wards of court’, children whose destinies are wrapped up in the long-running Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, and with the mysterious past of Lady Dedlock of Bleak House. However, Dickens’s novel is also one of the first detective mysteries as well, with a murder, a detective and the revelation of the criminal at the end. It allows us to trace the continuing issue of crime and the underworld in the 19th century.

Finally, for the fourth period of Dickens’ career, we will look at A Tale of Two Cities (1859), his novel of the French Revolution. Here, Dickens has another go at a historical novel, and rewrites the concerns of Barnaby Rudge with direct reference to the French Revolution. By comparing this late novel of 1859 to his previous one of 1841 (almost twenty years ago), we can span the divide and get a sense of how Dickens and his era have developed.

Set Texts
Charles Dickens, Oliver Twist (Oxford World Classics)
Charles Dickens, Barnaby Rudge (Oxford World Classics)
Charles Dickens, Bleak House (Oxford World Classics)
Charles Dickens, A Tale of Two Cities (Oxford World Classics)

Tutor Bio:
Dr Angus McFadzean is from Aberdeen, Scotland. He studied literature at Glasgow and Edinburgh Universities, obtaining a DPhil in the novels of James Joyce at Wadham College, University of Oxford. He currently teaches undergraduates as a sessional tutor at various Oxford colleges and summer schools with Oxford University Department of Continuing Education.