Digital Dickens

Dr Ben Winyard explains the online project to recreate the original Dickensian reading experience

Over his career, Charles Dickens (1812–70) wrote fifteen novels, five Christmas novellas and hundreds of short stories and articles, while also composing thousands of letters, giving almost weekly speeches and readings, and editing two periodicals (Household Words and All the Year Round). The field of Dickens-studies, then, is vast and critical work has expanded exponentially over the past fifty years, particularly as previous critical attention was to the forefront of utilising computing technologies to help us understand and experience the work of Dickens in new and exciting ways. Birkbeck’s Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies is currently orchestrating an online reading project, focused on Our Mutual Friend (1864–65), which builds on the successes of other recent digital Dickens projects. Our Mutual Friend, Dickens’s last completed novel, is encountered by most readers today as a rather hefty paperback, usually replete with an introduction, footnotes and appendices, or electronically on a tablet or e-book reader. Although the medium may change, the format – a single volume novel – remains the same. Victorian readers, however, first encountered Our Mutual Friend in twenty separate monthly parts, published between May 1864 and November 1865. Each instalment cost one shilling and was 32 pages long with two illustrations and over 70 pages of advertisements.

Running between May 2014 and November 2015, the online reading project marks the novel’s 150th anniversary and will finish just in time for the tenth anniversary of Birkbeck’s founding mission to provide original, intellectually rigorous scholarship for free. Birkbeck has also been a notable contributor to its founding mission to provide original, intellectually rigorous scholarship for free. Dickens’s contemporaries. We read, understand and enjoy Dickens. These audiences, and challenging and expanding how we read, understand and enjoy Dickens. Dickensian projects are also part of a wider trajectory of the monthly parts, but often take their own Dickensian flights of fancy, composing new dialogue, interacting with different characters and even developing online lives beyond the novel’s confines. In a development that would have surely delighted Dickens, some of the novel’s inanimate objects, including the stuffed crocodile in Mr Venus’s taxidermy shop and Silas Wegg’s wooden leg, are also tweeting. At the end of every month, the tweets are collated on Storify, thus providing an alternative retelling.

Birkbeck has also been a notable contributor to the field of digital humanities and is at the forefront of utilising computing technologies to help us understand and experience the work of Dickens in new and exciting ways. Birkbeck’s Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies is currently orchestrating an online reading project, focused on Our Mutual Friend (1864–65), which builds on the successes of other recent digital Dickens projects. Our Mutual Friend, Dickens’s last completed novel, is encountered by most readers today as a rather hefty paperback, usually replete with an introduction, footnotes and appendices, or electronically on a tablet or e-book reader. Although the medium may change, the format – a single volume novel – remains the same. Victorian readers, however, first encountered Our Mutual Friend in twenty separate monthly parts, published between May 1864 and November 1865. Each instalment cost one shilling and was 32 pages long with two illustrations and over 70 pages of advertisements.

Running between May 2014 and November 2015, the online reading project marks the novel’s 150th anniversary and will finish just in time for the tenth anniversary of Birkbeck’s founding mission to provide original, intellectually rigorous scholarship for free. Birkbeck has been a world-leading centre for Dickensian studies since the 1960s: many famous Dickens scholars have taught and researched, or been trained and nurtured, here. Timeless Professor Michael Slater, the world’s foremost Dickens scholar and a recent recipient of the MBE, taught in Birkbeck’s Department of English and Humanities for many years, while other notable Dickens academics who have expanded our understanding of Dickens include Isabel Armstrong, Steven Connor, John Drey, Holly Furneaux, Barbara Hardy and Sally Leder, among others. An annual Dickens Day conference was established by Professor Slater and other Birkbeck lecturers in 1986 and the event, which is now jointly run by Birkbeck, the University of Lancaster and the Dickens Fellowship, has just celebrated its twenty-eighth year.

Our aim is recapture the materialities and rhythms of nineteenth-century serial reading through digital media, while our blog promises to become a fascinating repository of critical thinking and discussion about the novel and a vital future resource for students, scholars and Dickens fans alike.

Alongside this, we are retelling the novel on Twitter: dozens of people are composing tweets, which can be no more than 140 characters long, in the guise of the novel’s panoply of characters. One of the most famous lines in Our Mutual Friend comes in part five (September 1864), when Betty Higden delightfully explains, as the founding Sloppy reads the newspaper aloud, “He do the Police in different voices.” Similarly, our anonymous tweeters are taking on the voices of Dickens’s characters. They follow the trajectory of the monthly parts, but often take their own Dickensian flights of fancy, composing new dialogue, interacting with different characters and even developing online lives beyond the novel’s confines. In a development that would have surely delighted Dickens, some of the novel’s inanimate objects, including the stuffed crocodile in Mr Venus’s taxidermy shop and Silas Wegg’s wooden leg, are also tweeting. At the end of every month, the tweets are collated on Storify, thus providing an alternative retelling.

With readers in over 80 countries and contributions from scholars, students and staff at Birkbeck and other universities worldwide, these digital projects are forging new reading communities, bringing Dickens to new audiences, and challenging and expanding how we read, understand and enjoy Dickens. Dickensian projects are also part of a wider digital strategy within the School of Arts, with some exciting new initiatives in the pipeline.

Dr Ben Winyard is the co-organiser of the annual Dickens Day conference. He completed his PhD in English at Birkbeck, and is also the Digital Publications Officer at the Centre.