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The 2013 Dickens Universe

California’s central coast had a cooler, foggier summer than usual this year, so it was no surprise to find Santa Cruz overcast on an early August afternoon as participants arrived at College Eight on the UC Santa Cruz campus for the 33rd annual Dickens Universe. Faculty and graduate students had been on campus since the day before.

This year, in fact, the Universe attracted 110 faculty and graduate students, the largest number since its inception, due to new member universities, including the University of Kentucky, University of Miami, Kalamazoo College, Arizona State University, and Ryerson University in Toronto. 130 other participants, including high school and community college instructors, UCSC summer school students, Dickens Fellowship members from across the country, and others, were in attendance.

On Sunday evening, Director John Jordan welcomed the group in the Porter College Dining Hall, saying that the Universe is “the most important annual Dickens conference in the world. It’s unique; I don’t know of any other conference like it. But,” he went on, “it’s also a book club. Everyone here is reading the same book or books.” And this year the plural was correct; as it has several times in the past, the Universe paired a Dickens novel with one by a Dickens contemporary: *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, last treated in 1993, and Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*. Jordan also
introduced the Dickens Project Office staff, JoAnna Rottke, Matina Tryforos, and Antje Anderson; and the Universe’s associate directors, Elsie Michie of Louisiana State University and Jim Buzard of MIT. Jordan promised a “mysterious musical event later in the week,” which suggested participatory theater even in the absence of much-missed longtime Universe attendee John Glavin of Georgetown University, who was unable to attend because of the change in dates. Jordan then introduced Susan Zieger, associate professor of English at UC Irvine, who gave the week’s opening lecture, titled “Enchanted Ink.” What do we see when we stare into ink, either on a printed page or in a blot? “Pareidolia,” Zieger said, can be defined as the ability to discern order in ink. In the 1830s and ‘40s, “ink gazing,” as illustrated in The Moonstone, was popular; young boys were supposedly able to see knowledge of “remote” people and events while staring into a pool of ink. But did the Victorians also foresee how their culture was changing as it related to ink? The technologies that allowed photography and print were changing rapidly in that era (she passed around fascinating samples of little clay “penny ink bottles,” which were sold around the world in the second half of the 19th century). In Edwin Drood, she said, Gooseberry, the boy whose eyes seem almost mechanized, echoes the ink-gazing boy in Collins’ novel. And there are other echoes: The Moonstone offers the enchantment of belief in the mysteries of the East, Zieger said, while Edwin Drood “references disenchantment” from the first paragraph, after which we are quickly disenchanted by Jasper: the sultans and elephants disappear, and we find the choirmaster is merely an opium addict. Were both Collins and Dickens, with their abilities to shift “from enchantment to technical explanations,” on an early trajectory
of modern psychology? Zieger asked, noting that Rorschach was born in 1884. Ink, she concluded, offers us “black mirrors to see ourselves.”

In the evenings, following the lectures, various films were shown, including the 1935 version of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, starring Claude Rains as John Jasper; the BBC’s 2012 version of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (in parts), with Matthew Rhys in the same role; and the 1997 Masterpiece Theatre version of *The Moonstone*, with Greg Wise and Keeley Hawes. For those who wished to read, or even sleep, in the evenings, these films were reshown after lunch.

Monday morning started out chill and early, with breakfast at 7:45 in the College Eight cafeteria and 8:30 discussion sessions for the public led by Project faculty (graduate students had their own workshops at this time, covering both their writing and their presentation skills). Kate Hext of the University of Exeter and Jeffrey Spear of New York University led the class this writer attended and provided a well-rounded overview of the social and historical context of the two novels under discussion as well as their thoughts on the lectures as the week went on. The most fascinating aspect of these morning groups, however, is not the presentation or even the input of the instructors, but the comments from other participants, many of whom have immense knowledge of Dickens’s life and work. High school teachers, college students, Dickens Fellowship members, and others weave a many-faceted tapestry of discussion in these early meetings, and that discussion is carried throughout the day and the week. Other faculty leading these classes included Iain Crawford of the University of Delaware, Mark Frost of the University of Portsmouth, Anne Humpherys of the CUNY Graduate Center, Gerhard Joseph of CUNY’s Lehman
College, Jessica Kuskey of UCSC, Thad Logan of Rice University, Sascha Morrell of the University of New England at Armidale, and Cathy Waters of the University of Kent. After the 8:30 sessions, attendees made their way back to Porter College for coffee in the Hitchcock Lounge and the first morning lecture of the week.

Before the Monday morning lecture, John Jordan announced this year's high school essay contest winner, Emma Brodey of Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who is attending the Universe with her teacher, Holly Roberts. Each year, one or two high school students win a scholarship in the form of paid attendance at the Universe for both the student and the teacher. Melisa Klimaszewski of Drake University presented “Hearing Two Voices” Conversations and Complexions” as this year’s Herb Furse Memorial Lecture, named for the founder of the Friends of the Dickens Project. Klimaszewski’s talk mirrored what were soon revealed as the underlying themes of the week: the British Empire, orientalism, race and color, and addiction, particularly to opium. Especially in these two novels, there is a conversation rather than a rivalry between the authors, she said; there is a “consistent creative exchange.” Dickens never collaborated with anyone but Collins (The Wreck of the Golden Mary, The Frozen Deep, and “The Idle Tour of Two Apprentices.”) In addition to Edwin Drood, Klimaszewski cited several other works by Dickens (“No Thoroughfare,” for example), wherein a character’s blood must be English to be fully acceptable. Collins follows the same model: Franklin Blake is raised abroad—has his character been tainted? Godfrey Ablewhite has a brown face; Ezra Jennings’ hair is black and white. “Skin tone is everything,” Klimaszewski said. “Complexion makes characters what they are.” In Edwin Drood, the dark Landless twins are “both
sympathetic and fear-making.” There are thus questions of “complexion” in both Dickens’s work and Collins’s that are directly connected to morality, she said, which, along with the relationship between two writers, makes the works more full and more interesting.

After the morning lecture, graduate students led discussions about the books themselves with groups of the general public from 11:15 to 12:30. Often called by participants the best part of the week, these discussions differ from the 8:30 classes by focusing on the texts rather than the contexts, but topics vary depending on the groups. Twenty graduate students lead discussion groups of fourteen attendees

Monday afternoon offered a variety of activities. Immediately after lunch, the High School Teachers’ Workshop, led this year by Julie Minnis and Dan Atwell, worked with a smaller crowd than usual due to the last-minute change in the Universe dates to the second week of August. Graduate students attended their own seminars, led by faculty during this time, and summer school students had separate classes. Also available in the early afternoon was a “Dickensian Seminar,” billed as an open conversation for, as John Jordan said, “those who didn’t get enough” discussion about the novels and Dickens during the other events.

Mid-afternoon found most registrants enjoying the Victorian Teas hosted by the Friends of the Dickens Project on the lawn at College Eight. Fragrant Earl Grey tea served in a vast collection of patterned china cups, homemade tea cookies, cold tea-and-ginger punch, and fresh strawberries were consumed on Monday through Thursday afternoons. After the teas, another series of lectures was presented throughout the week. These included “Passion and Pastiche: The World of Dickens
Junction,” by Christopher Lord, author of a series of mystery novels set in the fictional town of Dickens Junction, where each mystery is tied to a Dickens novel; “Picturing Edwin Drood: A Conversation” by Janice Carlisle of Yale University; “Collecting Edwin Drood,” by antiquarian bookseller and long-time Universe participant Bob Davis; and “Charlie and Katey: The Marriage that Connected Collins and Dickens,” by Lucinda Dickens Hawksley, author of Dickens’ Favorite Daughter and the Bicentenary keepsake book Charles Dickens and great-great-great-granddaughter of the author, who was on campus throughout the week.

On Monday evening, during the nightly Post-Prandial Potations, at which graduate students served wine, beer, and soft drinks, the university’s Bay Tree Bookstore offered books by Universe faculty, the Project Office unveiled the year’s T-shirts and sweatshirts, and Friends of the Dickens Project President Dan Atwell displayed the first of the week’s silent auction items on the patio in front of the Porter College Dining Hall, which serves as the auditorium for Universe lectures. After the winners of the auction were announced, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, spoke on “Beyond the Pale: Edwin Drood and the Sanctity of Life.” Cohen-Vrignaud said that Edwin Drood is not a whodunit, but a howdunit. There seemed to be a general acceptance throughout the week that Jasper was the murderer; this lecturer outlined the possible murder methods in the book. His list was long: impalement, stabbing, walling up, decapitation, whipping, stoning, head hammering, quicklime, guns, hanging, strangulation, and tying to a stake. The first paragraph of the novel, he posited, suggests impalement as not only the most possible method but serves as a metaphor for the entire novel. Echoing
Kilmaszewski’s lecture by pointing out that the “pale” in “impalement” can also refer to complexion, he related his list of forms of murder to the “rape” of the Indian and Turkish cultures by the British. The spire imagined by Princess Puffer at the start of the novel is symbolic of this rape; it is interesting to note, he added, that although the cathedral spire was merely imagined at the time the book was written, it has since been added to the cathedral in the town of Rochester, the model for Cloisterham.

Tuesday morning’s lecture was given by Elisha Cohn of Cornell University and was titled “Suspense and Suspension: Forms of Detective Fiction.” Cohn argued that the key to the plot of *The Moonstone* appears at the start of *Edwin Drood*: If I hide my watch when I am drunk, I must be drunk again before I can remember where I hid it. Just as Franklin Blake must be under the influence of opium a second time to realize the crime he has committed, so must Jasper. Throughout the novels, then, they are both living in a sort of suspension, not knowing what they have done. The readers are also in a sort of suspension: in the first reading, Cohn said, we are caught up in the “hyperactivity of detective fiction.” And why read detective fiction a second time? We already know what will happen. The second reading, she said, “is like taking opium.” We suspend, or withdraw, from our knowledge of what happens and our ability to comprehend it. “Focused attention,” she said, “can become a form of inattention.” In Collins’s novel, the characters have no superiority over mysteriousness; being under the influence of opium is not part of the narrative. In *Drood*, the novel opens with Jasper’s vision, a “first-person experience of suspension,” and there is a hint that characters may actually have knowledge that
they cannot access when they are not “suspended” that would solve the novel’s mystery. Even as detective novels, she concluded, “These novels ask us to read again” to see things we never saw before.

On Tuesday evening, attendees were treated to a performance by Gerald Dickens, great-great-grandson of Charles Dickens. The affable actor, who spent the entire week with the group, was introduced by John Jordan, who asked, “What right does Santa Cruz have to claim Charles Dickens?” The British universities who joined the Dickens Project gave the Santa Cruz conference credibility, he said, as did the BBC’s cooperative ventures. But, Jordan concluded, “This summer our legitimacy is confirmed. The Dickens family has come to the Dickens Universe.”

Gerald Dickens, accepting thunderous applause, said, “I’ve heard about this for many years, and I’m very happy to be here.” He paused, and looked over his shoulder at the blue-toned canvas portrait of his great-great grandfather that has graced the Universe lectures and performances for decades. “That’s disconcerting,” he said, drawing laughter. His first act, called “The Complete Works of Dickens,” was created to celebrate Dickens’s bicentenary last year, and it links Dickens’s major novels. However, he said in introduction, “You won’t see the joints.” He proceeded to work through scenes from *The Pickwick Papers, Oliver Twist, Nicholas Nickleby,* and the other novels. He was true to his word; he chose not the most famous or the most recognizable scene from each, but the segues between the vignettes were seamless, taking a line or a stage action from the end of one scene and making it into the introduction to the next.

John Jarndyce’s proposal that Esther become mistress of Bleak House became Josiah Bounderby’s wedding to Louisa Gradgrind; the Marshalsea turnkey’s discussion
with Amy Dorrit about her father became Mr. Lorry’s announcement to Lucie Manette that her father is alive. These juxtapositions created a marvelous show for this knowledgeable audience but also illustrated the consistency of strong characters in Dickens’s novels despite the variety of the stories. Gerald’s second act, “Doctor Marigold,” told the story of the traveling “doctor” who loses and then regains a family. Gerald believes it was written as a script, to be performed; it’s not a monologue. Dr. Marigold “becomes your friend” by the end of the story, he said. Did Charles Dickens ever imagine that, more than 140 years after his death, his descendant would be energetically performing scenes from his work, as he did, to an audience just as rapt? Gerald certainly channeled his ancestor, rendering The Inimitable as close to immortal as any person has ever come. He received a lengthy standing ovation from his appreciative audience.

Those who have attended the Dickens Universe for many years were looking forward to seeing Bob Tracy, professor emeritus of UC Berkeley, and his wife Becky, as Bob was scheduled to give the Wednesday morning lecture. However, Bob’s health prevented the Tracys from making the trip to Santa Cruz, and John Jordan instead delivered Bob’s lecture, “Designs of Darkness: The Moonstone and The Mystery of Edwin Drood.” The title comes from Robert Frost’s poem “Design,” which Tracy used as an epigraph, in part: “What...steered that white moth thither...?/What but design of darkness.../If design govern in a thing so small.” Mystery writers have such designs, according to Tracy. Collins invoked most of what we now recognize as the classic mystery elements in The Moonstone: a house in the country, a number of false clues, and a final explanation. Yet Dickens had reservations about all three of
Collins’s mysteries, which he published. When Dickens started *Edwin Drood*, he was demonstrating that he could write a mystery, and by doing so, he was challenging Collins, Tracy said. Like Klimaszewski, Tracy touched on Dickens’s relationship and correspondence with Collins, quoting criticism from Dickens’s letters to his fellow author. One of these letters mentions “the murder of a nephew by his uncle.” As far as Dickens’s “design” for the novel, Tracy said, “[Dickens’s friend and biographer] Forster explains everything.” Dickens, in fact, invited readers to compare *The Moonstone* and *Edwin Drood*. Again like Klimaszewski, Tracy believes that under the influence of opium, Jasper would have admitted murder, although he may not have fully understood what he planned and did. Dickens was “in control of his story to the last,” Tracy said of the design for *Edwin Drood*, although Collins wrote of the novel that it was “the melancholy work of a worn-out brain.”

Dickens Universe participants were free Wednesday evening to go to the Shakespeare Santa Cruz production of *Henry V* in the campus’s Festival Glen, which was magnificent as usual. Those who have added the Shakespeare productions to their Dickens visit each summer will be sorry to hear that this season may be Shakespeare Santa Cruz’s last; citing ongoing budget problems, the University has cut the program. An effort by the Shakespeare Santa Cruz Board of Directors to try and save the program has been announced.

Thursday morning’s lecture, “Rocks,” by Rebecca Stern of the University of South Carolina, won the prize, John Jordan said, for the shortest title. It was not, Stern assured the audience, a geological lecture, although she started by reminding us of the three classes of rocks, igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary, and that
they can transform from one to another over time. The connection between geology and the novels in her lecture was the revolution in geology that, she said, started in the 18th century. In the late 1700s, the idea of “deep time,” the amount of time it took to create rock formations, was just coming into the popular consciousness and contradicting the Biblical belief, Stern said. The idea of rock formations rising up from the earth over time to be “read,” she said, and making people aware of the amount of time it had taken for that to happen, had an effect on literature in the 19th century, especially, she said, in these two novels. In The Moonstone, a diamond, which is, as Ablewhite says, “carbon, mere carbon” (in other words, a rock), represents perfect geological stability, as opposed to the Shivering Sand. Yet it has a flaw—it’s too big; it would be more valuable broken up into smaller stones. In other words, it’s subject to erosion, as is Mr. Candy’s memory, upon which the whole mystery hangs. His speech has been, like a rock, eroded. Like the 18th century geologists, we must reconstruct what might have been from what remains. Thus the diamond, Stern said, “helps form the story surrounding it.” Edwin Drood, on the other hand, has a long list of obvious rocks: the dust and grit, the stone-throwing boy, Jasper’s name itself, the tombstones. Dickens portrays Cloisterham as a place where time has stopped, where the city believes all of its changes are behind it, but Stern argues that it continues to change. She also presented some interesting textual analysis in graphic form: the number of pages in each chapter of The Moonstone reveals a graph with high peaks and low valleys at the start, leveling off to very short chapters at the end. Her graph of the number of tense shifts between past and present in Edwin Drood looks suspiciously like the low skyline of a 19th-century
cathedral town. The geological discoveries of the day and the realization that landmarks were being constantly worn away definitely informed Victorian literature, Stern said.

Thursday evening’s lecture was titled “The Meta-Mystery of Edwin Drood: Broadway’s Victorian Music Hall and What it Means When You Decide,” and it was presented by Sharon Aronofsky Weltman of Louisiana State University. Weltman evoked Broadway’s *Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the 1985 Tony-award-winning musical, revived in 2012, which asks audiences to solve the mystery, as a platform for her talk. The concept is not new, she said, pointing out that Victorian music halls often demanded that an unpopular performer leave the stage. Dickens’s novel, she pointed out, is full of music—not only is Jasper the choirmaster, but music is also associated with the characters of Crisparkle, Durdles, Deputy, and of course Rosa, who plays the piano at Jasper's direction. And this was the cue for the “mysterious musical event” mentioned by John Jordan at the opening of the conference. Weltman introduced “The Dickens Universe Singers,” a group of volunteers who were arrayed in the lounge area above the auditorium floor, evoking nothing so much as a choir in a choir loft. But unlike Jasper’s dark-robed singers, these were arrayed in hats, fans, and shawls, and they sang “When Stars Are In the Quiet Skies,” with lyrics by Edward Bulwer-Lytton: “When stars are in the quiet skies/Then most I pine for thee/Bend on me then thy tender eyes/As stars look on the sea.” This, Weltman said, was representative of the type of song Rosa would have sung to the small gathering. But how do the relationships of the people at that gathering end? In the Broadway play, Weltman pointed out, the audience does not vote only on the story’s
ending; there are audience choices at many turns in the plot. Thus, the play has 400 possible outcomes, although the grand finale doesn’t change. Edwin Drood, she said, doesn’t die in the play, but Dickens does, mid-plot. Such adaptations are important in how we shape our sense of the Victorians. As the 20th-century play has numerous possibilities, Dickens “sets his scale to the changing keynote,” she concluded.

After Weltman’s talk, the crowd proceeded from the lecture hall to the Grand Party, an annual event hosted by the Friends of the Dickens Project. Chaired this year by Julie Minnis and Dan Atwell, the event featured desserts, cheese and crackers, wine, beer, and other delights, and it went far into the evening.

The final lecture of the week, “Dickens, Drood, and the Crisis of Occidentalism,” was given by Saree Makdisi of UCLA via a pre-recorded video. The Q&A portion was done via Skype. Makdisi, who was in Beirut, could see and hear questioners in real time. He spoke of the “here” and “there” view evident in Edwin Drood, but said that the superiority of “Englishness” was never quite as stable or secure as it seemed to be." There was, in fact, a corruption of the West by the East in Victorian England that is obvious in this novel. The Cathedral is in fact not a symbol of a healthy, quiet English town; it is saturated in the past, stalled in time, and it had been stalled, he said, “long before the Age of Empire.” The past England is mired in was never really transcended, and Rosa and Edwin find it stifling, Makdisi said. They are trapped by their marriage pact into a past they can’t escape. Even though Edwin is an Englishman who wants to “engineer change” in the East, Rosa dreads such a change. There is a “temporal breakdown” in the novel, Makdisi said: time “does not progress in a straightforward line” in this novel. Is the Occident really moving and
progressing, while the Orient is breaking down? Such has been the view of the “third world” for years, and other Victorian authors reflect acceptance of this worldview. Makdisi argued that, in reality, “modernity” must be the linking of things—spaces, identities, and times.

After the busy week, Friday afternoon was kept free for rest or visits to the town of Santa Cruz. On Friday evening, the 2013 Dickens Universe came to a close with its much-anticipated Victorian Dance, featuring dance instructor Angela Elsey and the Brassworks Band. The festivities were preceded by the Friends of the Dickens Project Auction, always a magnificent warm-up for the revels, and the announcement of the book for next year: Our Mutual Friend. The 2014 Dickens Universe dates are Sunday, August 3 to Friday, August 8. Online registration opens in January; visit http://dickens.ucsc.edu/universe for information.