London Writers: Blake, Dickens, Woolf

English 245

This course focuses on four writers from the last three centuries who lived and wrote about London in poetry, in fiction, and in essays, with field trips tuned to each writer. For William Blake, we visit the Tate Britain to see the display of his art work, as well as other London landmarks, like St. Paul’s Cathedral, imaged in his poetry. For Charles Dickens, we visit his house, now the Dickens Museum, in Bloomsbury, and we will visit many of the London locations for his essays in Sketches by Boz (1836). For Amy Levy, we will visit the British Museum where she used the national library reading room as her office for research and writing, and where she set her story “The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum.” For Virginia Woolf, we will take a Bloomsbury tour in conjunction with the Bloomsbury Group of which Woolf was a part, and we’d read her essay “Street Haunting” as well as Mrs. Dalloway, a novel about a day in London.

Students will have the opportunity to do research at the British Library on one of these writers. Students will write a short essay on each author in which they assimilate some local research (in the form of sight-seeing or archival research at the British Library) into that paper, and then a final paper in which they expand one of the shorter ones and incorporate more of their knowledge of the writer’s London from their own investigations of the city. This course would qualify as English 245, the seminar required for all English majors (honors track too), and would be open to non-majors too.

Reading list: Blake, Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience; Dickens, Sketches by Boz; Levy, “Readers at the British Museum” and “The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Museum” and selected poems from A London Plane Tree and Other Verse; Woolf, Mrs. Dalloway, “Street Haunting” and a few shorter essays, poems, and stories by other London writers.

Written requirements and learning expectations: four short essays (2-3pp) of a text by each author; an expansion of one of these three essays that incorporates local knowledge of London in relation to that text and author, or draws in another writer. Learning outcomes would include a grasp of each writer’s contribution to English literature and to literary depictions of London; a polished essay that has gone through a revision process in a workshop format.