

ESSE Conference 2024 Lausanne, Switzerland, 26–30 August 2024

Dickens Seminar Call for Papers:

“Heights, Depths and Other Extremes in Dickens”



No Thoroughfare by Charles Green. Charles Dickens Edition, 1871. Image originally scanned by Philip V. Allingham: <https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/xmas/15.html>

With its purer air and fashionable Alpine resorts, Switzerland attracted such illustrious visitors as Lord Byron, the Shelleys, Napoleon, Alexandre Dumas, John Ruskin, Elizabeth Gaskell, Robert Louis Stevenson, Queen Victoria and Charles Dickens (among numerous others) who temporarily moved his wife, six children and the family dog to Lausanne in 1846. Dickens’s

fascination with Switzerland, and the exploration of the country to which this gave rise is well documented in his letters, magazine articles and fiction, e.g. in *Pictures in Italy*, *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit* and *No Thoroughfare* (written in collaboration with Wilkie Collins). It is during his stay at Villa Rosemont in Lausanne in 1846 that he wrote *The Battle of Life* and the first three numbers of *Dombey and Son*. The sublime scenery and vertiginous mountain passes seemed to have had a powerful hold on his imagination, as he writes to John Forster in 1845 about his trip over the St. Gotthard Pass from Genoa: "The whole descent between Andermatt ... and Altdorf ... is the highest sublimation of all you can imagine in the way of Swiss scenery. Oh God! what a beautiful country it is!" In a letter to Forster in 1854, he mentions the creative possibilities and a new imaginative perspective on the world that the Alpine heights provide: "I have visions in living for half a year or so, in all sorts of inaccessible places, and opening a new book therein. A floating idea of going up above the snow-line in Switzerland, and living in some astonishing convent, hovers above me," but he is equally aware of the dangers of high altitude travel recording his experience of the journey with Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg above the Valley of Chamonix in 1853 when a boulder falling from the mountain top narrowly missed hitting Egg.

The theme of heights and depths, of abrupt rising and falling is explored both literally and metaphorically in Dickens's fiction. Eulogising their book-learning retreat on the roof of Fledgeby's counting-house, Jenny Wren points out the peace and rest she and Lizzie Hexam experience there:

But it's so high. And you see the clouds rushing on above the narrow streets, not minding them, and you see the golden arrows pointing at the mountains in the sky from which the wind comes, and you feel as if you were dead. (*Our Mutual Friend*, ch. 5, book 2)

"Come up and be dead!" she calls to Mr Riah to join them and leave the constraints and noises of the gritty labyrinthine streets below for a while. In *Dombey and Son*, the narrator imagines what revelatory insight the bird's eye view of people's lives would provide if he could pry into their intimate domestic settings through the roofless houses: "Oh for a good spirit who would take the house-tops off, ... and show a Christian people what dark shapes issue from amidst their homes, to swell the retinue of the Destroying Angel as he moves forth among them!" (ch. 47). As for depths, we have, not only the frozen deep of the Arctic in the natural world in the play of that name but human abysses such as the staircase down which Mrs Sparsit imagines Louisa Gradgrind to be descending to her ruin, or indeed the whole imagery of 'fallen women'

to which her vindictive fantasy belongs. The omnipresence of the death by drowning trope in the Dickensian canon is equally worthy of consideration.

The organisers invite you to interpret the theme of “heights, depths and other extremes” in Dickens broadly and imaginatively in connection with his fiction, travels, journalism or personal life. Please submit your abstracts of 250–300 words to seminar convenors Michael Hollington and Magdalena Pypeć (wahlverwandschaften@gmail.com, magdalenapypec@uw.edu.pl) by **31 January 2024**. The notifications of acceptance will be sent out by **29 February 2024**.