



Trafalgar Square by Moonlight, 1865, by Henry Pether via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

NIGHTWALKING BY MAGIC LANTERN, FINDING YOUR INNER FLANEUR WITH CHARLES DICKENS

Perpetually plagued by bouts of insomnia and writer's block, Charles Dickens spent many hours wandering London's streets in the dead of night. He famously conceived of the city as a 'magic lantern' that invigorated his creative process and 'supplied something to [his] brain' (*Letters* 4: 612).

Sauntering through London's nocturnal neighbourhoods fuelled his imagination and provided him with ample material to people his fictional worlds.

His contemporaries credit him with a 'clutching eye' and 'a power of observation so enormous that he could photograph almost everything he saw' (*Letters* 3: iv).

Dickens would have no doubt been aware he was practicing an art known as 'Flânerie'. The concept of the flâneur emerged on the scene in mid-nineteenth century France, and describes an urban observer who wanders through a city, taking in its everchanging sights and sounds.

“ Men have been chained to hideous prison walls and other strange anchors 'ere now ... but few have known such suffering and bitterness at one time or other, as those who have been bound to Pens.”

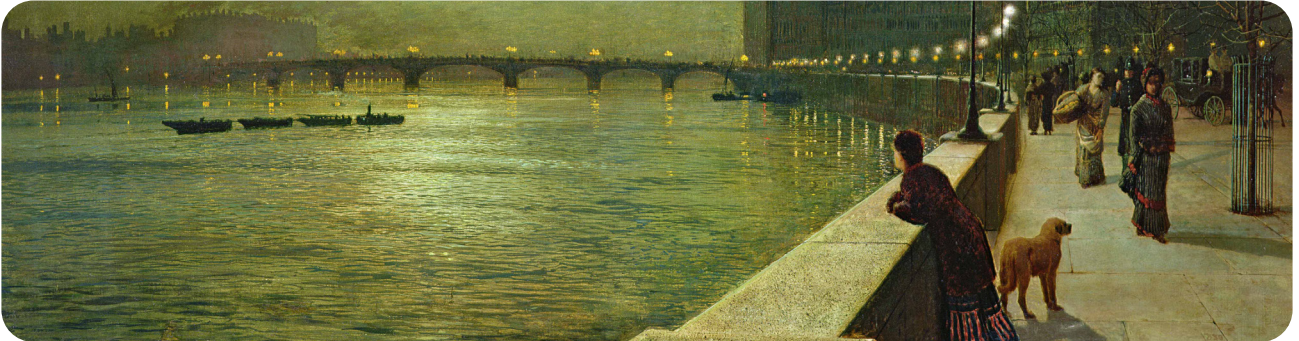
- Charles Dickens, writing in a letter to Angela Burdett Coutts in 1843. (*Letters* 3: 500).

TIP: Among all the characters Charles Dickens depicted, none have played as pivotal a role in his literary oeuvre as the city of London itself. How would you characterise the setting of your novel? Is its 'personality' as distinct or dynamic as Dickensian London?

“ A day in London sets me up again and starts me. But the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE!!! ... my figures seem disposed to stagnate without crowds about them.”

- Charles Dickens, writing in a letter to John Forster in 1846. (*Letters* 4: 612)

RESEARCH ACTIVITY: FIND YOUR INNER FLÂNEUR



Reflections on the Thames, Westminster (1870) by John Atkinson Grimshaw, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Go to clic.bham.ac.uk, click 'concordance', and select several texts from the drop-down menu under 'search the corpora', according to the period in which your novel takes place. See our earlier '[building your corpora](#)' handout for further guidance.

Select 'all text' under the subsets option.

Type one of the terms noted below under 'search for terms' and hit enter. You can also use a specific location like 'London'.

*city, court, crowd, explore, lane, neighbourhood,
public, river, road, run, saunter, street, stride,
stroll, suburb, town, walk, wander.*

Remember, an asterisk can be used as a wildcard – so *street** would also find *streets*. If you'd like you can type in multiple terms at once by selecting the 'any word' option.

You can click the 'in bk.' option on the far right of each result to view each quotation as it appears in the source text.

Repeat your search using an alternate term as many times as you need to.



The Strand (1899) by John Atkinson Grimshaw, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Perhaps the streets of your novel, like those of Dickensian London, are full of ‘[dense brown smoke](#)’ or ‘[avoided by all decent people](#)’?

Tracing Dickens’ streets through his oeuvre, can be swiftly done using CLiC’s concordance feature. Using the above search terms, we can map London’s metaphorical movement and unpick how Dickens teases the city's latent phantasmagoria to the surface.

Once you have run a concordance for your search words, you can organise the display according to specific criteria.

For example, Dickens’ characters can rarely chart a course through the city without being consumed by its [labyrinthine streets](#).

So, if you go to the **KWICgrouper** and select 'labyrinth', CLiC will show you all the lines where your search word occurs together with the word 'labyrinth'.

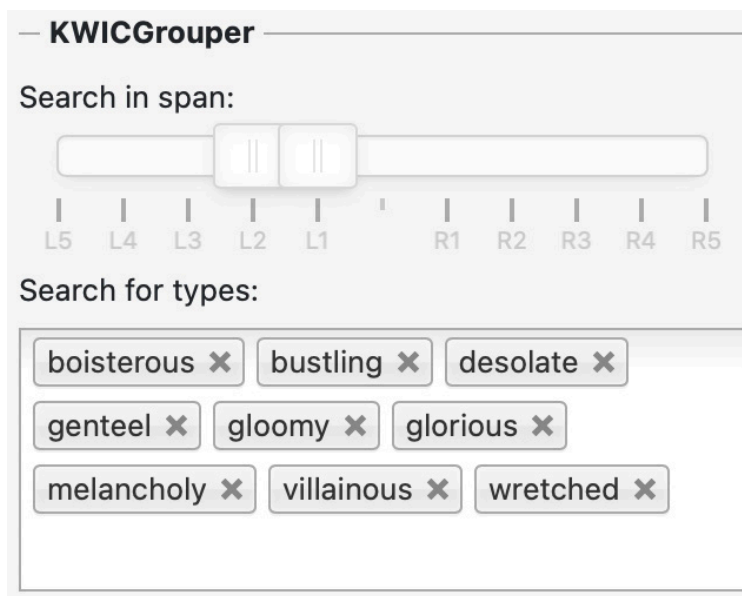
1	We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of	streets	that I soon lost all idea where we were, except	BH
2	yard, hemmed in by a labyrinth of back streets and	courts,	with a little burying-ground round it, and itself buried in	DS
3	ged and ragged little friend through a labyrinth of narrow	streets	and lanes and alleys, which emerged, after a long time	DS
4	in a yard, hemmed in by a labyrinth of back	streets	and courts, with a little burying-ground round it, and itse	DS
5	bricked in; at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow	courts	upon courts, and close streets upon streets, which had	cHT
6	at the heart of the labyrinth of narrow courts upon	courts,	and close streets upon streets, which had come into exi	HT
7	more melancholy, of which there is a labyrinth near Park	Lane.	Wildernesses of corner houses, with barbarous old portic	LD
8	had plunged for a full half-hour into that labyrinth of	streets	which lies between Seven Dials and Soho, without emerg	NN
9	moment he was dragged into a labyrinth of dark narrow	courts,	and was forced along them at a pace which rendered	OT
10	the house stealthily, and hurrying through a labyrinth of	streets,	arrived at length before a public-house, which Noah rec	OT

London's thoroughfares are often [anthropomorphized or endowed with their own emotions](#). See, for example, *Little Dorrit's* 'melancholy streets, in a in a penitential garb of soot' (line 7).

1	king its nightly way through the damp dark boisterous streets	to such a place of rest. 'You spoke so feelingly	LD
2	¶ They rattled on through the noisy, bustling , crowded street	of London, now displaying long double rows of bright	NN
3	ne healing virtue in him, went away along the desolate road.	She had been ill, probably for a long time. I	DC
4	on the shady side of a tall, dark, dreadfully genteel street	in the region between Portland Place and Bryanstone	DS
5	stop presently. And stop we presently did, in a gloomy street,	at certain offices with an open door, whereon was pai	GE
6	had the courage to rise and peep at the gloomy street	from their curtained windows, crept back to bed again	NN
7	made the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous. Melancholy streets,	in a penitential garb of soot, steeped the souls of	LD
8	st on, my lads!" ¶ We were again upon the melancholy road	by which we had come, tearing up the miry sleet	BH
9	s, Mr. Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street,	undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corru	BH
10	I would have lived to be old, in the wretched streets	- and to wander about, avoided, in the dark - and to	DC

In this example, words that indicate emotion (known as modifiers) have been observed in a concordance search for 'court* street* road* lane*'.

To group such words together, you can again use the **KWICGrouper** to pick them out.



The tool does not provide the results for you entirely automatically, but once you have an idea of the words you find interesting, you can use it to display them together.

Now think about how you'd find useful examples that are more specific to the activity of flânerie? The word 'stroll*' is a good starting point, as this verb describe a kind of leisurely walking.

Running a [concordance search for 'stroll*'](#) across Dickens' works yields [numerous examples of male flânerie](#).

Mr Bucket, the formidable detective of Dickens' *Bleak House*, seems to draw power from London's streets (line 1), as though the city itself has endowed him with a cosmic understanding of its topography.

David Copperfield takes an aspirational stroll to Covent Garden Market during his lunch break to stare ['at the pineapples'](#), then a rare and exotic fruit imported or grown at great expense (line 3).

1	unkind, Mr. Bucket pervades a vast number of houses and	strolls	about an infinity of streets , to outward appearance rather	BH
2	to walk straight to the house. First, he resolved to	stroll	up another street for five minutes, then up another street	BR
3	at a venison shop in Fleet Street ; or I have	strolled,	at such a time, as far as Covent Garden Market	DC
4	Arrived at Paris, and resting there three days, Mr Dorrit	strolled	much about the streets alone, looking in at the shop-winc	LD
5	see him take his corn, he set forth on a	stroll	about the streets with a vague and not unpleasant idea	MC
6	where to find a tavern open, he was fain to	stroll	about the streets and market-places until morning. ¶ He f	MC
7	this time to be his frequent companion in his morning	strolls	about the streets , and it was at this time that	OMF

In contrast, feminine movement through Dickens' urban landscape is fraught with anxiety. In *Oliver Twist*, Nancy's ill-fated life begins from the moment she recollects her 'eyes and senses opening on London streets' (line 4). Throughout the novel, she is haunted by 'horrible thoughts of death' while phantom coffins pass her on the street.

Likewise, in *David Copperfield* Martha allies the symbiotic pollution of both her and the river Thames with their migration into London: 'I know that it's the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable' (line 3).

Lady Deadlock (of Dickens' *Bleak House*) explicitly charges the streets themselves with her death – her last words scrawled on a piece of paper are 'I know that I must soon die. These streets! I have no purpose but to die' (line 6).

3	no harm in it - and it creeps through the dismal streets,		defiled and miserable - and it goes away, like my life	DC
4	I can recollect my eyes and senses opening on London	streets	have known any better life, or kinder words than they	OT
5	go out--don't go out! Mistress, you'll die in the	street!'	¶ Her mistress only disengaged her dress from the bes	LD
6	hours, and I know that I must soon die . These	streets!	I have no purpose but to die. When I left	BH

OVER TO YOU...

Using the previous examples to guide you, think about what words might be useful starting points for a concordance analysis that captures the city streets. Once you have run your search, look through your results and take note of the impressions that various characters experience while walking. You can record these impressions in the box marked 'inspiration'.

Does what they see offer a glimpse into the life of another? Do they take special note of certain smells sights or sounds? What is it that captures their attention as they walk? The contents of specific shop windows, the daily routine of passers-by, or perhaps the diversity of the city around them? Do they detect a change in atmosphere, remark on a surprising encounter, or make generalisations about what they observe? How does architecture or transport factor into their impressions? Is the picture "painted" dependent on the weather, season, or time of day?

Use your findings as inspiration to flesh out the world you want your own characters to inhabit. If you were to follow in the footsteps of one of your characters what would you observe? You can note down your ideas in the box marked 'application'.

INSPIRATION

APPLICATION



Glasgow, Saturday Night (c. 1870) by John Atkinson Grimshaw, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

WRITING ACTIVITY: A STEP BACK IN TIME

Using what you have learnt in the previous research activity, take a metaphorical walk around the neighbourhood of your novel. Close your eyes and wander with intention. Have your pen at the ready, as you “stroll” and take a moment to record the impressions that come to you.

Make sure you jot down any relevant sensory information. What would your characters be able to smell? Polishing agents from the local blacking factory? Or perhaps, manure from the many horse-drawn carriages? What would they hear? Church bells? Wiley street vendors touting their wares? How might your impressions shift if you were to “journey” under the cover of darkness?

If you need further inspiration, why not take a leaf out of Charles Dickens’ book and find your own “magic lantern” by strolling around an evocative location?

When you have sufficient material, come back to the twenty-first century and incorporate these impressions into a scene of your own.

Why not post your draft under [#CLiCCreative](#), or by tagging us [@CLiC_fiction](#) on Twitter?



