Call That Reading? Creative Approaches to Literary Studies and Literary Heritage

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Abstract

This essay seeks to reconfigure the disciplinary boundaries between English, Creative Writing and Heritage, through their shared commitment to place-making as a form of story-telling. Specifically, it argues for the inclusion of English in the group of disciplines collectively known as the "Creative Industries." It aims to provide a toolkit for researchers and teachers working in or across these disciplines, helping to interrogate and collapse boundaries between them. To this end, the essay is structured in three parts: Museums, Literary Pilgrimage for Victorianists and Creative Writing. Each section includes case studies and creative responses, to open up new ways of researching and interpreting the literary text. The essay ends with a call to action, proposing the university campus itself as a site where students can create their own "Museum of 'What if…'"

Keywords

Creative Writing; Dickens; Heritage; literary tourism; museums; Creative Industries, place

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Call That Reading? Creative Approaches to Literary Studies and Literary Heritage

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton

In a recent meeting, I raised the issue of what we might call sensory inclusivity in critical approaches to the literary text. Whatever, I lamented, happened to the promised "haptic turn"? And isn't it just lovely when we are asked to smell or listen to something, instead of being told to picture it? The response was telling. English colleagues appeared intrigued and muttered things like, "Good point" and "hmm" (code for "You've just said something quite clever"). Creative Writing colleagues, by contrast, were mildly puzzled by this waste of everyone's airspace. As one of them put it, "you mean working with all the senses? We say that in every seminar." English and Creative Writing are closely related disciplines, but we are clearly not talking enough.

As someone who works across both subjects, I find it difficult to draw the line between their respective approaches to textual interpretation. But as a working definition, we might say that English is primarily interested in *what* a writer does and Creative Writing wants to know the mechanics of *how* they do it. Both subjects also intersect with Heritage, through their shared commitment to story-telling. But while Creative Writing and Heritage are routinely included in the umbrella term 'Creative Industries,' English is not. So are literary scholars missing a trick?

One reason for reading more creatively as Victorianists is that it opens us up to new ways of experiencing the literary text, which can be assimilated into our critical and analytical practice. Within universities, there is some cross-fertilisation between writers and scholars of contemporary literature. Within English itself, there are nineteenth-century scholars writing neo-Victorian fiction. And yet in my conversations with the late Prof Neil McCaw, we found that neither of us had met another Victorianist who also taught Creative Writing. I have never matched his feat of including a cover-to-cover reading of *Middlemarch* in the set reading for undergraduate writers. Based as I am near Dover, what I do dream of doing is taking students to the white cliffs and conducting a group reading of "Dover Beach" as we listen to the 'grating roar' (line 9) below. Then I dream of the risk assessment and put it off for another year.

The article that follows uses case studies across the related disciplines of English, Creative Writing and Heritage, and aims to provide a toolkit for breaking down some of the

barriers between them. It asks what happens when we engage with the literary text through immersion in historic landscapes, rewrite Victorian prose to help us engage with our own sensory responses, and increase our sensitivity to material objects beyond the text itself. Ultimately, I want to argue that obstacles notwithstanding, the perpetual boundary crossing between English, Creative Writing and Heritage can provide new insights and challenge us to work in more innovative ways. The article is structured in three parts: Museums; Literary Pilgrimage for Victorianists; Creative Reading and Writing.

Museums

Doing the Time Walk

Funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund from 2025-7, "Let's Do the Time Walk Again! Exploring the East Kent Coast Through Digital Heritage" is a new project inspired by the Digital Humanities project Kent Maps Online (KMO), which I co-lead with our Research Librarian Michelle Crowther. In a special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* Joanna E. Taylor and Amber Pouliot point out that new technologies can "dismantle readers' experiences of a significant site" (2020: 383). To this end, Teams of volunteers (including students) are researching and digitising collections for digital storytelling platforms in four locations: Ramsgate Clock House, Broadstairs Dickens House Museum, Sandwich Guildhall Museum and Deal Museum.

The character of seaside "resorts" has been established in fairly consistent language since the nineteenth century, and the sensory environment is key to these portrayals. Houses are defined by holidaymakers in terms of their proximity to or views of the sea, as well as their possible draughtiness in windy weather. Ephemeral sounds such as band music are associated with defined seasons. The atmosphere is routinely invoked as something tangible, absorbed as it were through nose, mouth and skin. Ask someone landlocked to describe sea air and they will almost certainly reference salt (having spent much of my childhood by the sea, I personally have a lurking predilection for rotting seaweed). All these sensory prompts are common in written accounts by visitors.

But if tourists visit the resort, locals live in the town. The two communities may experience the same environment quite differently – it is likely, for instance, that fishermen would register changes in the weather with greater accuracy, and be more alert to tides and fading light than would a tourist. Museums curate both groups, bringing their impedimenta and ephemera together in new juxtapositions.

Our aim is to weave together museum collections and archives, walks and creative interpretations, to ask new questions about seaside towns between the mid-nineteenth century and WW2. Watching my own response to these spaces felt like an excellent place to start. I went to see Ramsgate Clock House just before the project began. It had an excitingly raw feel, largely because it was closed to the public and the collections were being catalogued and stored so that renovations could be done on the building. By way of creating my own archival record, I have included my unedited notes below rather than shaping them as a formal record:

> The day I go, the museum is still largely inaccessible: unheated, collections in process of being recorded and put in boxes, space is being used for that work to be done and not for visitor access. The records are in 19C cursive script and fairly easy to read. There is time to turn a few pages and admire it, no comfortable place to sit and read it, not enough time to work out what to do with it. This in itself flags up the different levels of engagement associated with archives

> – looking at something when as yet there are no instructions re what to look at or how. How do we spend time with these records?
>
> What do you do with old newspaper cuttings and VHS tapes? They are less obviously historic than the beautifully bound harbour records, but share their ephemeral quality.
>
> A volunteer has brought in a fossil, which I initially take for a stone carving. Lighthouse apparatus: no one knows what it's doing here, but it's impossible to move, forcing staff to design around it. The smell of mould is headache-inducing after a while, forcing the visitor to think about the material environment in which memory is being curated. The lifeguard's uniforms are somehow less real for having been carefully conserved. Seeing these objects in a state of transition prompts slightly different questions. What is preserved by chance and what responsibility might that bring?

The Dickens House Museum in Broadstairs is now managed by Thanet District Council, but it was the home of novelist and Dickensian dramatist Gladys Waterer until her death in 1973. Since then it has flaunted its credentials as the original of Aunt Betsey's cottage, with a carefully curated parlour complete with green fan and medicine press. As *David Copperfield* (1850) is less specific about how the rest of the cottage should be furnished, there is plenty of scope for associated Dickens objects and Victoriana. The museum has always been a significant site for the Dickens Festival parade, and holds a number of festival guides from the twentieth century.

As Dickens visited what was then 2 Nuckell's Place while on holiday in nearby Bleak House (then Fort House) in the 1840s, there is an immediate opportunity for visitors to map their own holiday onto this space. Indeed they cannot avoid becoming part of the visual frame as they walk from one to the other. Dickens House Museum and Bleak House are perfectly positioned to eye each other over the curve of the bay, each built along the clifftop, with the sea shuddering below.

Among the other exhibits in Deal Museum, a disused boat takes up a large part of the ground floor. It is refracted through a Victorian photograph in which it still has sails, but which somehow makes it look much smaller and almost unreal. An extensive postcard collection constructs the beach as a tourist site, obfuscating its sometimes violent history. Like Dover, Deal has historic links to smuggling, and in the General Election of 1880 the beach was a rallying point for political unrest. Victorian and Edwardian postcards foreground the presence of summer visitors in elegant clothes, often with the pier as an enticing background. One thing the town could not do was heat the sea. But visitors who were immune to the temptation of sparkling waves and smartly-painted bathing machines could be lured by an 1878 postcard of Clanwilliam House (now a house, but constructed as a swimming pool). Twentieth-century postcards include "giddy shrimps" and mildly "saucy" jokes, in the fashion of the time. Historic periods are blurred in cartoons with a built-in flap containing concertinaed Victorian pictures of the town.

In Sandwich town square the public lavatories feature a silhouette of a tight-laced Victorian woman above the word "Ladies." There are so many games to be played with this. *We know what you're doing under your layers of whalebone. While you're in there, mind you behave like a lady.* I remember later that this is the town where a woman once called the police, because her neighbour was using plastic clothes pegs.

Like Deal, Sandwich Guildhall Museum has substantial holdings of postcards and cartes de visite. Someone took the trouble to capture a baby show in 1919. There are pictures of the cattle market outside the window, there used to be a House of Correction (pulled down after just 50 years), and an old gateway which the curator tells me no one remembers. If we take new photos and superimpose them on these ghost sites, does that constitute a kind of composite placemaking or just whimsical illusion? I'm looking forward to arguing the point.

One aim of the Time Walk project is to explore iterative and imaginative ways of incorporating historic collections into literature teaching, and make them accessible to students. A Postgraduate Archives Day held by the International Centre for Victorian Women Writers (ICVWW) in 2023 confirmed that many English students want to work with university and library special collections, but feel unsure how to set about it. ICVWW curates a number of collections relating to women authors of the long nineteenth century. The Mary Braddon Archive includes sketches, photographs and account books, as well as writer's drafts, letters and cuttings. The Sarah Grand Collection of Personalia is kept in Grand's monogrammed suitcase and includes a passport, powder pot, fruit knife and other useful objects, as well as a half-smoked cigarette complete with ash. Undergraduates also enjoy seeing the handwriting or personal possessions of writers whose books they are studying on their course. The problem is knowing what to *do* with these items. They are after all used to working with edited volumes and indexed monographs, not boxes of paper and discarded cigarettes.

For this reason, Michelle Crowther leads carefully structured sessions for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, providing prompt questions and clues that can be decoded by transcribing letters and matching topical references to online newspaper sources. Confusion can easily set in – naming conventions are tricky for both Mary [Elizabeth] Braddon [Maxwell] and Sarah Grand [Frances Clarke / McFall], while blotting paper is an impenetrable mystery to many of our students. But these taster sessions are an excellent way to build confidence: those wanting more can sign up for volunteer roles and work towards a certificate.

Museum objects develop skills in decoding and critical thinking in a slightly different way from either literary studies or Creative Writing, most obviously through their strategic arrangement of space and objects. But it is worth bearing in mind that the Victorian museum "was conceptualised as a book-like thing" (Holman 2002: 37) – in Folkestone the library and museum were designed in 1888-9 as adjacent and complementary spaces. Unlike a flat archive box, the museum flaunts its own expansiveness. In the words of Barbara Black, "the museum is a whorehouse is a mausoleum is a department store is a secular cathedral is a disease is a glory" (2000: 19). Like a Victorian novel, it takes up space. It is also infiltrated by an awful lot of paper. Crucially, museum displays are underpinned (sometimes invisibly) by archives and external records.

Much like a page of creative writing, a museum display selects and arranges details to prompt a particular set of responses. This can in turn help us to think in creative ways about the relationship between objects and text. We are encouraged to notice the labelling of significant pieces such as a politician's writing desk, while less aesthetic objects such as cleaning cloths and boot brushes are quietly removed. I am literally incapable of visiting a house museum without worrying about where I would put these unappealing but necessary items. Although this may be just me.

Nicola Watson suggests that "there is and always has been something that threatens to be inconveniently over-material about a writer's house, meaning that the house may not adequately account for writing conceived as dream or vision" (2020: 129) The need for abstraction has to be balanced against the practice of memorialising, in which "a writers' [sic] house may function as a repository of memories linked to objects or spaces, as an archive which documents a person's intellectual and emotional biography" (Hendrix 2008: 5). But precisely whose memories are accommodated by the contemporary house museum? Interpretive strategies draw out aspects of a writer's interaction with a property. But this still entails written signage, telling visitors where and how to look. What Black terms "the relentless production of text that the sites of collection generate, from labels to mission statements to fantasy fiction" (2000: 4) inflects the museum's interpretive spaces in various ways.

In Somerset Maugham's 1930 novel *Cakes and Ale*, the writer Driffield (believed to be based on Thomas Hardy) is of working-class origins, and his middle-class wife takes exception to his taste in furnishing. She "was determined to have things right, so she had to change things one by one so that he didn't pay any attention" (Maugham 2000: 178). After his death, she welcomes literary pilgrims to what they believe is the "authentic" version of his house. In what is surely an ironic nod to Dickens, Driffield's biographer confides to the narrator:

> the hardest job she had was with his writing-desk. I don't know whether you've noticed the one there is in his study now. It's a very good period piece… Well, he had a horrible American roll-top desk. He'd had it for years, and he'd written a dozen books on it… You must get Amy to tell you the story how she managed to get rid of it in the end.
>
> (178)

Literary Pilgrimage for Victorianists

The history of reading is ineluctably also the history of place. And literary pilgrimage, including armchair tourism and creative interpretation, has nineteenth century origins. Thomas Frost records that one dramatisation of *David Copperfield* placed the fateful meeting between Peggotty and Martha outside Canterbury Cathedral (1880: 160). This Victorian rewrite is especially audacious. But should you ever find yourself slightly lost in Canterbury – if, let us say, you have dropped your car off for a service and gone left instead of right on the way out – you may find yourself wandering down Tennyson or Shelley Avenue. Both authors have a somewhat tenuous Kent connection; neither is remotely associated with Canterbury. Clearly that is not a problem for local town planners.

The names appear incongruous because of our cultural preoccupation with evidence-based heritage and literary placemaking. The highly successful Blue Plaque scheme exists to mark buildings associated with notable figures, and the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of literary guides directing the curious to associative places (inevitably this included a number of guides to Dickens Land). Professional critics, who are by definition analytical and critical, were quick to leave the party and have been slow to return. Although we may research the history of leisure reading, we tend to distance ourselves from absorbing its assumed traits. Put simply, excessively emotional responses to a text can be configured as naïve. Until fairly recently, to become too immersed in the material traces of a writer's life was to risk becoming embroiled in hero worship, or authorial intent, or perhaps (insert the oft-repeated phrase of your own, doubtless exasperated undergraduate lecturer).

But tracking historic readers' responses, and measuring them against one's own, reveals important intersections between literary study and what we would now term the Creative Industries. Alexis Easley points out that "[t]he growth of the literary tourism industry was inseparable from the practice of bio-geographical tourism that emerged in the periodical press during the same period" (13). Research by Nicola Watson (2020), Alison Booth and others has shown the complex interplay of literary placemaking, periodical reviewing and canonicity. As Booth forcefully puts it, "[p]ilgrimage to authors' shrines gathered signatures, in a way, to put different writers and locales on the ballot initiative to alter literary histories" (2016: 8).

Emotion may feel spontaneous, but it is heavily advertised, as from the start this collective activity was captured and described in the press. Margaret Stetz shows that "[i]n the world of late Victorian print culture, literary tourism provided a splendid opportunity for *quid pro quo* promotional efforts. Encouraging readers to tour sites associated with living writers – and to do so either virtually, through the pages of the magazine, or in actuality – was tied directly to monetary arrangements with publishers" (Stetz 2009: 125).

Pilgrim or tourist? The distinction is implicit, but permeates accounts of readers' interaction with literary sites. Literary 'pilgrimage' retains traces of its original meaning: a journey leading to a transformative encounter with the sacred, perhaps mediated by material relics. Framing the destination as a quasi-religious site, such pilgrimage insists that the author is worthy of attention and even reverence. In other words, it stands as a marker of canonicity. The attribution of emotional and cultural currency occludes the tourist dimension of the trip; but in a double win, it also has the capacity to confer popular status through the invocation of reader buy-in. Tourism by contrast depends on pragmatic considerations, including how attractive or tangible the designated locations can be made to seem, whether they are accessible to travellers and if there is a decent hotel somewhere nearby.

These boundaries dissolve on impact for two main reasons. Firstly, a quasi-sacred site sustains its symbolic function through allowing access, making it once again subject to practical imperatives; and secondly, the imbrication of tourism and ritual is one of the mechanisms by which authorial reputations are sustained. These considerations explain the construction of the author as what Booth terms an "uncanny biographical mannequin" (2016: 12), comprised of whatever materials are still available: portraiture, verbal descriptions, images of favourite walks, plaques, and graves.

Jerome K. Jerome's 1889 *Three Men in a Boat* satirises graveyard tourism in J's determined efforts to elude a loquacious sexton who disturbs his reverie by offering him a tour of the graves: "'[g]o away,' I repeated, 'leave me before I get over the wall and slay you'" (55). As this comic encounter reminds us, graveyard tourism risks diminishing the unique status of a given figure through its memorialising conventions. In a churchyard full of famous writers, tourists must imaginatively blur out the ones they have not come to see. The high visibility of the tourist standing by a monument further detracts from the sense of a private encounter. In Wargrave, J comically deflates the status of children's author Thomas Day by reinstating the spatial contiguities of local graves:

> Day, the author of *Sandford and Merton,* lived and – more credit to the place still – was killed at Wargrave. In the church is a memorial to Mrs Sarah Hill, who bequeathed £1 annually, to be divided at Easter, between two boys and two girls who "have never been known to swear or to tell untruths, to steal, or to break windows." Fancy giving up all that for five shillings a year! it is not worth it.
>
> (115)

Detractors were inclined to see literary tourists as vandals violating the dignity of both living and dead authors. On the pretext of paying homage at these meaningful sites, they were plundering and changing them, as they chipped away at statuary and carted away personal items. But pilgrims and tourists have a similar investment (in both senses of the word) in associative objects. In each case the enthusiast is securing not just relics, but also souvenirs of their trip for display to their own circle.

This emphasis on physical objects raises the difficult question of provenance, which plays out in the rival museums in Julian Barne's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), each of which claims to hold the authentic stuffed bird which for a time sat on the writer's desk. Paradoxical as it may sound, the strategic marketisation of authors goes some way towards solving this dilemma. Photography enables the acceptable production of replicas which do not profess to be unique objects, while also enabling purveyors to show their own skill. The circulation of these images is actively promoted through the creation of postcards as acceptable merchandise, closely tied to the socially approved practice of letter-writing.

Witness, Medium or Interpreter?

Whether it is framed as pilgrimage or tourism, the idea of a personal encounter tends by definition to refocus attention on the visitor's own experience. The interaction with literary sites is often configured as a quest narrative. It allows the visitor to be positioned – or position themselves – as not only reverential, but also as an adventurous traveller. The visitor to literary sites is placed in a hierarchy of categories, which for the purpose of analysis can be constructed as: Witness, Medium and Interpreter. All three roles embed a level of creative agency.

The engaged Witness may feel a sense of responsibility, recording heritage sites at risk of erasure or redevelopment. This kind of engagement with the landscape involves conscious scene-setting. One Victorian visitor to Dickens's house Gad's Hill refused a tour of the house itself, asking instead to see the famous Swiss chalet where *Edwin Drood* was written. The removal of this chalet from its original location is registered as the "desecration of a hallowed scene which all lovers of Dickens will ever regret and never forgive!" In a bathetic conclusion to the visit, the writer complains that "I do not want to see any more, but I am told that I must visit the spot where Dickens buried his birds" ("The Home of Charles Dickens" 1889: 5).

For others, the experience may be less emotive and more forensic. This approach can be particularly useful in guiding the reader through topographical problems, if they have not been to the place and bought the T-shirt. Recent research by CCCU Creative Writing PhD student Elizabeth Waterman-Scrase uses interdisciplinary research methodologies to link the early editions of *David Copperfield* to the material conditions of the Dover Road. Phiz's illustrations "deliberately show the sole of the shoe to the reader" (Wateman-Scrase [n.d.]). Early readers might have noticed "the smooth soles with no dots to represent hob nails" (Wateman-Scrase). Crucially, David is wearing light and unsuitable shoes on a road that is likely to have been a dusty mix of cob, track and tarmac (Waterman-Scrase). Given such a clear prompt, readers may want to revisit David's comment that he has no way of brushing his hair before meeting his aunt (184). This may seem like the least of his problems. But as he finishes the walk to the famous white cliffs, he is literally telling us that he looks like a mendicant, covered in dust and chalk.

The Medium sees the visitor as a conduit for ghostly visitation, and so refines and refocuses generic language about writers 'haunting' particular locations. This approach speaks to spiritualist trends; more importantly, it directs attention to the visitor's receptive sensitivity to emotional or literary impulses. They may even create a template for the 'right' way to engage in literary pilgrimage, semi-independently of any one author. Harald Hendrix posits that "[i]t is the more general idea of authenticity, of getting in touch with the world of the past and of the imagination, that turns out to be the greatest attraction of the visit to places like writers' houses" (2008: 7).

The Interpreter may assimilate both Witness and Medium roles, recording their own experience and adding it to the record. Helena Kelly's "Ellen Woz Ere" (written for KMO) offers one way of bridging the gap between academic research and creative non-fiction, through an imaginative engagement with the historic presence of Ellen Ternan in Rochester. Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout* (1969) stretches this idea to breaking point, using the curation of Dickens's image to frame a tense encounter in Bleak House in Broadstairs. In articulating the power of Eva's personality, the narrator comments that "[i]t took Dickens" not to be "eclipsed" by her (114). In the house, which was at the time set out as a museum, Dickens's desk chair is framed through a missing paratext, Luke Fildes's picture "The Empty Chair"; so well-known is this picture that the explanatory label is inscribed only with the same words. In this construction of literary iconography, the absence of Dickens is registered as being almost more powerful than

his presence could have been. Eva's defence for having sat in the chair herself is not that she is a channel for the dead author; rather that "[o]ne can untie the cord, then tie it again" (114). This behaviour is registered as a violation, although one visitor to Gad's had already recorded that, "in the room with the empty chair!" they immediately sat in it before signing the visitors' book ("The Home of Charles Dickens"). This is incidentally the same person who strenuously objected to the removal of the chalet.

A Creative Response

My own poem "Watering-Place" was written in real-time on a visit to Broadstairs. At the Albion hotel the ubiquity of the writer, "everywhere, Dickens" (line 8), is reduced to a series of dates on a plaque commemorating his visits, "1839 and 1840 / on the stone outside. / 1845, 1849. 1859" (lines 9-11). But the act of "Writing this on a table" (line 16) deliberately pulls the reader into conversation, stretching the sound to its limits through a rhythmic shift towards dactyls and trochees. My own creative act is metrically reflected in the task of returning my coffee accoutrements, further prolonging the encounter with an imagined reader:

> taking my cup and saucer
> carefully back to the bar.
> (lines 17-8)

This aural trickery is meant to assert the importance of my visit as a literary pilgrim, through a playful competition with a famous precursor. Dickens, when all is said and done, just gets a series of dates. In lingering over tangible details, I insist that the reader should really *notice* my presence on the scene.

Creative Conversation: A New History of Reading

In Creative Writing we talk to students a lot about the mechanics of writing, in relation to particular strategies: *how* does a writer manipulate our mood, and what can you do with this information once you have it? Our own emotional response is the raw material – data, if you must - for a greater understanding of literary affect. Still, it is one thing to analyse the paratextual mechanisms that produce affect; deliberately inducing it by making trips to literary hotspots is difficult to explain in a workload allocation model. In any case, professional critics are often wary of immersive research, of the kind that creative writers deem indispensable, and, as Watson observes, "[a]s a practice that tries to make the emotional and virtual realities of reading accountable to the literal, material realities of destination, [literary tourism] is bound to make literary specialists uneasy" (Watson 2020: 5).

But this approach can be helpful in the articulation and refinement of our thinking, as "[w]e are actively implicated in that reiterated act of creative imagination by working on the same material forms" (Andrews 2016: para 19). In a recent conversation, someone asked me: if a writer wants us to see a particular landscape, shouldn't they be able to write it well enough that we don't need to go anywhere? In my own case, as a neurodivergent non-visualiser, this is never going to happen. But beyond the question of accessibility, what I am now going to start calling 'literary visiting' has a unique power to galvanise and mediate critical conversations.

Visiting Dickens's Rochester throws up more problems for literalists than it could ever hope to solve. Satis House was not actually the inspiration for Miss Havisham's domicile (which is based on Restoration House in a different part of town); asked which of a possible three gatehouses was Jasper's home in *Edwin Drood*, the artist Luke Fildes replied, "I never

felt the necessity or propriety of being locally accurate" (in Hughes [1891] 1893: 129) because Dickens himself was so imprecise. But there are benefits to walking down the High Street, beyond the question of where Jasper's fan mail should be delivered. Whichever novel you happen to be in, the spatial layout fixes attention on what the reader has repeatedly been told: this is a small community with many opportunities for spying, studded with rival pubs and an impressive cathedral. Perhaps you already knew that. You doubtless remember too that at one point in *Great Expectations* Estella superciliously shuts a gate in Pumblechook's face (50). Dickens has mentioned that he is a large man, and one who has just had a good breakfast. But then Dickens mentions a lot of things - and had you really thought about the discomfort of his double walk, which he is expected to repeat at some unspecified time that afternoon? Becoming sensitised to place alerts us to what we might otherwise miss in the writing itself – what is literally there.

Shortly after the lifting of Covid restrictions I found myself standing on the roof of Gad's Hill, Dickens's Kentish home from 1856. From this vantage point it is possible to get a clear view over the marshes towards Cooling churchyard, the most obvious site for Pip's initial encounter with Magwitch. What struck me about the writing of the novel was that a wealthy and famous Dickens would have been looking in one direction, while his childish and already-flawed alter ego was looking fixedly back at him. Fanciful, perhaps. But this privileged observation of the marshes has stimulated new conversations with both English and Creative Writing students. The house itself is now a school, and the head teacher showed me the names of generations of students who have added themselves to the record with illicit penknives. Their names in turn create a paratextual link with both *Great Expectations* and *A Christmas Carol* (the house is a likely model for Scrooge's school).

Shared Reading Practices

Dickens makes an ideal candidate for reading aloud; Matthew Rubery notes that in the nineteenth century "[d]iscussions of sound recording frequently cited Dickens's name despite the inconvenient fact that the phonograph was incapable of recording his novels" (38). But what happens when the intimacy associated with reading aloud is wrenched away from the domestic fireside and into the places where his novels are set?

Psychogeographer Sonia Overall argues that as sedentary thinkers, writers "can forget that we have bodies at all" (2021: 5). This is problematic because "characters need to be bodies inhabiting real spaces, not floating bundles of motives and speeches. Objects need to be tangible" (5). Just walking around is known to stimulate ideas, and can infiltrate literary texts in subtle ways. In *Bleak House*, Dickens uses anaphora to capture Esther's sense of horror when she discovers the frozen body of her mother Lady Dedlock:

> She lay there, with one arm creeping round a bar of that iron gate, and seeming to embrace it. She lay there, who had so lately spoken to my mother. She lay there, a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature.
>
> (2008: 847)

Sue Zemka comments astutely that "[o]nly a committed walker could devise such a surprisingly effective and inimitable method for taking his readers into the minds and hearts of his characters, forcing them to experience pathos through the sound forms of repetitive motion" (2012: 119). Overall recommends that as part of the reading experience, we all walk "in character" (2021: 47). The idea is "to access an embodied version of that character's part in the story," creating a bridge between the world of the novel and "your own experience in the landscape – here, now, in your own body" (47).

We cannot be sure how many enthusiasts actually declaimed passages of Dickens to each other while investigating the topographical aspects of his writing. But the idea of going somewhere in order to start feeling something would have raised comparatively few Victorian eyebrows. So a few years ago this is precisely what I did with another researcher. This series of literary visits would inspire 'Mobile Landscapes', the pilot article for KMO, appearing just in time for the Dickens 150 commemorations in 2020.

An 'on location' approach offers an opportunity to bring together historic practices and create new kinds of research. Which of course, whatever we claimed at the time, was not how it came about. It actually began with my suggesting to a friend that we visit the Dickens House Museum in Broadstairs, read *David Copperfield* to each other outside Betsey Trotwood's parlour window, then swim in the sea like salmon-coloured porpoises (To C. C. Felton, 1 September 1843. Pilgrim 3.547-51. 548). He assumed I was joking about the swimming and I never expected him to go through with the al fresco reading. We were both wrong.

My memory of this initial experiment is that the first minute was both excruciating and revealing – when someone is reading to you in a public place, they have something to do and a page to hold, while you have nothing to do with your hands and no idea where to look. Which explains why:

> Aunt Betsey stared in desperate silence as she was told that "I was robbed at first setting out, and have walked all the way, and have never slept in a bed since I began the journey."
>
> (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.])

The Dickens House Museum itself is situated on the cliffs, with a public promenade immediately in front of it. In this situation you have two obvious options: remain on an impromptu stage and whistle nonchalantly, or allow yourself to be driven forwards into the house:

> But if she then "got up in a great hurry, collared me, and took me into the parlour," getting further into character with a series of energetic pokes in the ribs, at least she wasn't shouting "DONKEYS!" and upsetting the neighbours.
>
> (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.])

It is hardly surprising that visiting a museum in this heightened state will change the way it appears. But what I had not expected was that the after-effects would permeate that day's experience of Broadstairs itself, a town I had already visited on numerous occasions.

This section of "Mobile Landscapes" begins the habit of drawing in passersby as minor characters, in a passing reference to "the man at the window table who sat and beamed like Dr Strong, almost certainly without seeing us" while we ate lunch. Not only is an awareness of setting vital to this type of enquiry; it can also encourage meta-responses. My tribute poem "The Copperfield Draught" was made possible because I had been in a particular frame of mind – "Dickensed up" as I later expressed it – when I noticed the man, and this altered my response to the environment itself. Notwithstanding the joke in "Mobile Landscapes," this solitary diner had obviously been watching us, indeed he "blessed us. Or that's / what it felt like" (Oulton, 2020: lines 33-4).

Unable to reciprocate the imagined blessing directly, I imagined the poem itself as an epistolary exchange:

> Dear man in the window
> This is the woman you were watching.
> I liked you too.
>
> (Oulton, 2020: lines 35-7)

This literary escapade was successful enough to prompt further trips across Kent, and in each case the landscape itself seemed to be transformed by the act of reading Dickens's fiction. As duly recorded in the later write-up, "the places where these things befell us somehow became different, hyper real. No longer small country towns, but focused stage sets, where anything might happen" (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.]).

The distinctively-shaped gravestones in Cooling Church are famous because of their appearance in the opening chapter of *Great Expectations*. One of our PhD alumni, Pat Argar, is a member of the Comport family. She has written movingly about her response to learning that this story which left her "spellbound but terrified" was inspired by her ancestors' graves. (n.d.). But for Dickens's readers, the lozenges remain very much Pip's siblings. Their positioning in the churchyard intensifies the child's vulnerability; sitting in the church porch and looking over the marshes enables a further series of affective hits. From this position one picks up on symbolic topographical features that are available to readers of the novel, but which may not be registered in the process of silent reading: the flatness and expanse, the contiguity of the parents' gravestones, the distance from the comparative safety of the village. Looking around, a listener recognises multiple tropes from the storyscape, as the nominated reader works through Pip's list; this may be experienced as a fleeting synchronicity, before the narrator's recollection is brutally interrupted by Magwitch.

Importantly, the reading also places the listener in the role of fictional bystander:

> you can hear the roughness of the man assuming rights over a child he has never met; the diffidence of the boy as he introduces his parents, the names of the dead who stand witness and can do nothing. You want to help, but it's too late, and you know what will happen next but there's nothing you can do.
>
> (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.])

The act of reading aloud itself is an affective prompt because by its very nature, it materialises the reader while galvanising responses to the imagined world of the novel.

As the reading ends, the shared focus is collapsed and reader and listener are left looking directly at each other, "And you know how it will end – a fading away, the closing of the book, and silence. That will be thank you. You'll have to move, look at each other, but that's ok, you've done this before. And then you're running through the rain, towards the river." (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.])

Next Stop: Rochester

As the setting for a disproportionate percentage of Dickens's fiction, the town presents particular challenges. For instance, how is the literary visitor supposed to filter the competing claims of Pickwick and Pip to the Bull Inn? "Mobile Landscapes" describes the anxiety incurred by trying to feel appropriately in what turned out to be the wrong inn:

> we found ourselves in a startlingly empty, neon blue and purple bar, trying not to notice the prevalence of cocktail umbrellas or to look each other in the eye. Immediately we found

> ourselves speaking in whispers, as if we had been kidnapped or inadvertently walked into the wrong meeting.
>
> (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.])

By contrast, a reading of Estella's derisive evaluation of Pip: "He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy… And what coarse hands he has. And what thick boots!" (Dickens [1861] 2008: 55) prompted meta-responses, following the decision "to infringe some dignity at work policies in the park opposite "Satis' Restoration House" (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.]). In the novel no one intervenes to protect Pip when he is verbally abused. Reading Estella's cruel speech in a public place is psychologically demanding, but there was very little apparent interest from the few people sitting nearby: "Pip detected guiltily looking at his feet. Distracted glance in our direction from mother of still indifferent child" (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.]).

Once again, the reading experience permeated the afternoon spent in the town. But it is important to recognise that such intense experiences are not sustainable on longer trips. For this reason, Heidi Liedke argues that "while the label did not exist, there was an awareness of the (unsettling) concept of non-places in the nineteenth century. Thus, the guidebooks presented techniques which enabled the traveller to be constantly busy, especially when waiting" (71). While "Mobile Landscapes" links a series of day trips undertaken over a period of several months, many of the encounters are predicated on the need to eat and drink, a detail that is often missed in our reading of landscape.

As it happened, the one act of rudeness we experienced was proffered by a young and well-dressed woman, one of the bar staff in a Rochester pub. We "went through the door and straight into Estella. The real one this time" (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.]). In this context, her behaviour prompts reflection on how characters are intimidated by the young and self-assured ward of a wealthy woman. "Pip however had endured as much abuse as he was going to take from a fictional character" (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.]). The wry self-awareness of the adult Pip finds its way into the account of our own Pyrrhic victory, "[g]ratifyingly we had a cool half hour in which to show that she didn't scare *us*, before suddenly remembering the [parking] meter and making a less dignified exit than we might have chosen" (Moffat and Oulton [n.d.]).

Our collective response to nineteenth-century authors and their writing is still influenced by the literary journeys made by curious Victorian and twentieth-century readers. As critics including Watson, Booth and Hendrix have persuasively argued, one reason for pursuing such enquiries is therefore to examine the relationship between literary mythologising and the text itself. In this context, "[r]eassessments of literary tourism since the 1990s can be aligned with renewed interest in affect and audience response, material culture and environment, as well as the lives and social networks of writers" (Booth 2016: 20). In the twenty-first century, writers' houses and the places associated with them continue to stimulate strong responses. "Mobile Landscapes" ends with a serio-comic justification, its conclusion subtitled "in which we justify all this gadding about by insisting that it was serious work." But it is intended to spark genuine debate.

In the process of reading aloud, the reader acts as the author's medium, in the sense that listeners are receptive to the speaking voice while at some level disconnecting it from the person in front of them. The reader themselves may attain new insights as they alter their speech patterns for the sake of conveying meaning. I had thought I knew the churchyard scene in *Great Expectations* fairly well. But it was only in reading deliberately slowly to a group of students that I noticed something odd. I asked the group what they would expect to fall out of a fictional boy's pockets: string, perhaps; decayed toffee; a penknife? Pip tells us himself that there is

something very wrong, when his pockets are turned out and "There was nothing in them but a piece of bread" (Dickens [1861] 2008: 4).

Creative Reading and Writing

For International Women's Day in 2024, I was asked to lead a workshop with a group of Year 12 students. As the ICVWW special collections include a collection of objects owned by Sarah Grand, I wanted to use images of the New Woman to help students access their own preconceptions of Victorian writing. We looked at pictures of Grand's cigarette case. But I also read them an excerpt from "The Tenor and the Boy," the interlude in *The Heavenly Twins* (1893). I chose the passage in which the Tenor realises to his horror that the reckless young man he has been spending time with is not Diavolo at all, but his twin sister Angelica, the very woman he has idealised from a distance and wanted to marry.

Grand's own deconstruction of gender culture apparently resonated with some of the group. Angelica's riposte, "[t]here is no room to move on a pedestal" (Grand [1893] n.d.: 458), was always going to be a crowd-pleaser. But I wanted them to think more about the Tenor's revulsion of feeling, derived as it is from a very particular construction of femininity. So on the spur of the moment, I asked everyone to tell the person next to them that they were "an ideal of purity, a goddess of truth, an angel of pity" (446). It was only by saying the words aloud that the group started to feel embarrassed by them. And only by witnessing this could I fully register myself, how comfortably these stereotypes had been sitting in the attributed thoughts of the character.

Creative Writing students are rightly wary of characters who could, by any stretch of the imagination, be mistaken for a goddess of truth. So how might they in turn benefit from more consistent exposure to nineteenth century texts? Virginia Woolf's famous response to Edwardian realist authors is not encouraging. Their Victorian inheritance, she suggests, is a tedious obsession with detail and context, "[b]egin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico" (Woolf 1966: 332). Such details were doubtless boringly familiar in 1923, when this essay was first published. However in much the same way that a later generation was gleefully urged by IKEA to "Chuck out your chintz," the satire works only if readers have access to the relevant cultural information through their parents' reminiscences. So, sorry Woolf, but I'm telling you to back off. In the twenty-first century this level of detailed research is precisely what writers need for their creative placemaking, and imagining a period room is an excellent way to sharpen those skills. Mistakes can be distracting, so splendidly, the CLiC corpus project run by the University of Birmingham includes research activities including "Checking your manuscript for anachronisms" (CLiC 2023).

Of course as Victorian authors well knew, there is no point taking the reader into a room if nothing exciting is going to happen once they're there. For this reason the study of affect is as important for Creative Writing students as it is for their counterparts in English. Nicholas Dames argues that "the qualities most valued" by Victorian critics themselves include an investigation of "what *kinds* of feelings a novel produces, and *how long* those feelings persist. … the technical means by which they are produced or balked, and the possible ethical (or social) significance of those affects" (2010: 19).

Tropes such as the pious death can open up conversation. But the writer's success in producing particular feelings will of course be culturally inflected. How hard the "professional seducer" (Vernay xxiii) has to work, in other words, will depend on the reader's assumed

receptivity to the scene described. As a Christian reader myself, I find many of these scenes genuinely moving. I admit that I am also quite capable of laughing at the death of Little Nell. At the same time, Deidre Lynch points to the ways in which repeat reading familiarises and embeds feeling in the everyday life of the reader. Like marriage itself, "Canon love demands a capacity to remain in relationships for the long haul and thus a willingness, especially, to reread" (Lynch 2015: 27).

Of course there is a problem here. English students are expected to take some interest in the expansive possibilities of the long form novel, with its multiple plots and nuanced development of character. Creative Writing students are predominantly, and often firmly, not Victorianists. Feedback shows that they find the language difficult, and the lengthy descriptions "waffly." Expecting them to read 3 volumes of it even once, let alone on repeat (and if you are not Neil McCaw) will only lead to mutual disappointment.

Unlikely as it sounds, it is here that Victorian physiological novel theory once again comes to our rescue. Dames has shown that this contemporaneous approach to the reading of (frankly enormous) 3-decker novels nonetheless "posits a short-term-memory-only reader, who experiences the narrative as a series of affective "moments," or, in other words, as a rhythm" (2007: 57). Readers immersed in large texts are duly catered for with "a rhythmic alternation of heightened attention and distracted inattention (7) that actually encourages "mental drift" (83). We are confronted then, with avid readers who are balked by actual books, who struggle to remember what they read the day before, and who are liable to be distracted at any moment. If this sounds familiar, then Victorian fiction may offer ways of asking precisely the questions that we need to bring to a creative writing seminar.

One practical solution to the problem of wordcount might be to create thematic student anthologies including excerpts from novels as well as short stories, non-fiction and poetry. This approach was used by Victorian publishers and has been repeated with great success in our own time by the Reader Organisation. The 2010 anthology *A Little, Aloud* isolates passages often taken from long novels, prompting discussion based on the "moment" being described.

Pragmatic considerations aside, exposure to particular passages or excerpts can be useful in various ways. For student writers, sustained attention is necessary if they are planning to write their own novel. Otherwise, it may be more important to isolate specific techniques across a range of literary forms. Like their counterparts in English, Creative Writing students are expected to develop complementary strategies across taught modules. They borrow aural trickery from poetry, juxtaposing unexpected images and scattering half rhymes from a discreet distance. They take stage directions and turn them into stories. They use found text to create mosaics of new meaning (under the last Conservative government, political attacks on the Humanities were particularly satisfying to repurpose in this way). Short forms may offer the most effective way of showcasing and adapting these building blocks. For English students, a micro-approach can be useful in identifying the mechanisms of affect. Understanding how a text is written, before being told how to read it, can be a stimulating experience and may throw up some unexpected responses.

Place and the List

In my "Writing Place, Nature and the Environment" undergraduate module I impress upon students that if they want me to take an interest in their characters, I need to know *where* they are and *when*. Inevitably one of my favourite twentieth-century novels begins by breaking both rules: "The past is another country. They do things differently there" (Hartley 1953: 7). But this famous opening line from *The Go-Between* (1953) is immediately followed by a detailed piece of Edwardian scene-setting:

> When I came upon the diary it was lying at the bottom of a rather battered red cardboard collar-box, in which as a small boy I kept my Eton collars. Someone, probably my mother, had filled it with treasures dating from those days. There were two dry, empty sea-urchins; two rusty magnets, a large one and a small one, which had almost lost their magnetism; some negatives rolled up in a tight coil; some stumps of sealing-wax; a small combination lock with three rows of letters; a twist of very fine whipcord, and one or two ambiguous objects, pieces of things, of which the use was not at once apparent.
>
> (Hartley 1953: 7)

The diary, on which the narrative depends, is carefully framed by two wistful invocations of an unspecified past. It is both a place where things are done "differently," and an archive in which some objects are catalogued while the use of others is "not at once apparent." Between these two distancing devices though, we are given a number of clues in the list of "treasures," belonging securely to "those days." We can tell from this list that the narrator has visited the sea, that his amateur photographs have been developed, and that someone he knew still used a seal on their letters. In the pages that follow, Leo Colston drags his reluctant memory through the pages of his childhood diary, to reveal the trauma he experienced in the hot summer of 1900. Persuasive narrator that he is, Leo knows only too well that in order to critique the past, we first have to get good at noticing it.

This opening passage provides a useful starting point for discussing "the past" with students. When and why did boys wear detachable collars? How were photographic negatives important before digital cameras? Did they themselves have a combination lock as children? Bonus points for anyone who knows how sealing wax was used. These small details may prompt students to think about the objects they themselves valued as children. Through free association, they may be able to recall where they played or interacted with these objects, who was there, and how big the furniture seemed.

Place and the Senses

Great Expectations is relayed by another traumatised narrator, haunted in much the same way as Leo by his childish complicity in adult betrayal. In a much-quoted passage, Pip sets the parameters of his subsequent relationship with Miss Havisham by detailing his first impressions of Satis House. The disconcerted child is ushered into a dark room, where he is entirely dependent on candlelight. The small flame acts as a muted spotlight, in relieving the shadows and focusing attention on the figure of Miss Havisham as she sits in her wedding dress. The use of colour in this scene is a focaliser, appealing to our visual faculty. Famously, the narrator constructs the eccentric spinster as weird and ghostly largely through the use of a setting in which white predominates. This apparently "old" woman (who is probably in her forties) deliberately merges into her surroundings, "she had a long white veil dependent from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. … Her shoes were white" (Dickens [1861] 2008: 52). Her accoutrements, littered around her, are also white. But the objects we are directed to notice are bleached with age, sitting in the darkness rather than competing with it.

Unlike the opening of *The Go-Between*, this passage does not proclaim itself a list. But it zones our attention in much the same way, as Pip's highly selective recall controls what we see and how we interpret it. Like readerly burglars, we are invited to gorge ourselves on the swag left so carelessly lying around:

> Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about.
>
> (52)

Miss Havisham herself is "dressed in rich materials, – satins, and lace, and silks, –" (52). Our attention is arrested by incongruous details, "she had but one shoe on" and the clocks have all been stopped at the same time. But while noticing that "her veil was but half arranged," Pip also remarks on "her watch and chain" and that "lace for her bosom lay with those trinkets" (52).

As readers we may feel that we are innocent of casing the joint, but the austerely brought-up Pip lingers over every opulent detail. The reason we fail to notice is that the hierarchy of objects is disrupted by the insistence on whiteness and obsolescence. A deceptively expert narrator, Pip hypnotises us with low visibility and a repetition of the word "white," to move our eyes around a small area. Once he has our attention, he uses discrete objects to magnetise us. It is our eyes, not the recalling narrator's, that take in this scene in the slow rhythms of poetry. Our eyes, not Pip's, are adjusting to the darkness and moving from the chair to the dressing table as we try to find our bearings. Like the child narrator who has come in from the morning light minutes earlier, we are offered only a limited range of vision. But for readers with weak visual processing ability, the intense and sequential focus on a series of objects is not only an intensifier: it is the best chance we are likely to get of actually picturing the scene.

In another memorable passage slightly later in *Great Expectations*:

> A fire had been lately kindled in the damp old-fashioned grate, and it was more disposed to go out than to burn up, and the reluctant smoke which hung in the room seemed colder than the clearer air, – like our own marsh mist. … every discernible thing in it was covered with dust and mould, and dropping to pieces. I looked along the yellow expanse [of the tablecloth] out of which I remember its seeming to grow, like a black fungus, I saw speckle-legged spiders with blotchy bodies running home to it, and running out from it.
>
> (76-7)

English students often analyse this depiction of Satis House through a recall of visual details. In fact the olfactory sense is also invoked strongly, if indirectly. This realisation might prompt writers to develop their own strategies, with neurodivergent readers in mind: describing one object at a time, in a clearly demarcated space and through a range of senses.

Writing exercises can usefully focus on aspects of the immersive world that have been edited out or not specifically referenced. In this case, students can be asked whether they smell damp and mould while reading the passage. By undertaking what is in essence a critical analysis, Creative Writing students can then think about how to build sensory "hits" into their writing. When I first did this exercise with my students, one of them astutely noticed that Pip makes no reference to mouse droppings. Reinstating this missing detail was suggested as a suitably pungent, compensatory strategy for modern readers who may never have experienced the vagaries of an unswept chimney. (If you try typing "unswept" into google, only to be confronted with a monitory red line and some spelling suggestions, you will immediately see what I mean.)

I use both these passages as the basis of an exercise, "What's in Miss Havisham's handbag?," in which students are encouraged to create a long list of items that the character insists on hoarding. We then take it in turns to vote out the things we feel she could do without. A social media post from the first time I tried this confirms that "[w]e had a good old declutter,

and got it down to a supersize bar of chocolate, an old love letter and a manicure voucher given to her by Compeyson."

Trial scenes

Later in the novel, the trial format encourages a further range of visual perspectives, as characters look at each other. Magwitch's trial plays with sunlight in similar ways to the depiction of white at Satis House, focalising the reader's vision in a dark room:

> The sun was striking in at the great windows of the court, through the glittering drops of rain upon the glass, and it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the Judge, linking both together ... Rising for a moment, a distinct speck of face in this way of light, the prisoner said, "My Lord, I have received my sentence of Death from the Almighty, but I bow to yours," and sat down again.
>
> (Dickens [1861] 2008: 418)

The convict in this account both blocks the light and is finally redeemed by his acceptance of "the way"; Jesus describes himself as both "the light" and "the way" at various points in the Bible. However the narrator is not just using a symbolic trope to convey complex emotion, he is literally telling readers where to look.

As Magwitch goes out, we are not directed to look at eyes and faces or even the movements of prisoners' hands, the most obvious signifiers of emotion. Pip tells us that "he held my hand while all the others were removed" (418), meaning that we are unable to determine if his hands are shaking. But our attention is nonetheless riveted on bodies in subtle ways. Some of the convicts chew herbs and "the audience got up (putting their dresses right, as they might at church or elsewhere)" (418). The reader judges these small gestures while the onlookers themselves "pointed down at this criminal or at that, and most of all at him and me" (418). Pip's narrative account in a sense returns their gaze, although at the time his attention is presumably fixed on Magwitch. The setting demands this kind of intense focus on micro-details, in ways that are easily picked up by the reader.

Literary court scenes are exhaustively interested in how the jury interprets body language and the ability to make eye contact – is the prisoner shifty or humiliated, innocent or heartless? In Mary Braddon's 1861 *The Trail of the Serpent*, sign language is used as a means of secret communication, which the jury and bystanders are not used to seeing and which can therefore be used in public. The falsely accused "Daredevil Dick" is condemned for murder, until he reads a message on his supporter's hands – the reader belatedly learns that he has been advised to "Sham mad" to gain time (Braddon [1861] 2003: 199).

These ritualised encounters allow us to judge characters, and to question the judgements of both narrator and officialdom. They are useful for practical reasons too. Firstly, they allow multiple interpretations of the same evidence to be relayed sequentially, without disrupting the chronology of the story. Secondly, the legal teams are permitted to ask direct questions about details the reader may have lost sight of somewhere around chapter 3. They probably win the fictional prize for getting round the "Show, don't tell" rule.

For all these reasons, many teachers of English and Creative Writing have a fondness for staging literary trials with students as characters and jurors. Not only does this approach prompt us to ask questions which may be brushed aside in the text; the omission of particular details may not even be apparent until we come to gather the evidence. Alyson Hunt, then a PhD student under the auspices of the ICVWW, wrote the brief for *Lady Audley on Trial* as part of the Being Human Festival in 2016. Both legal teams were made up of current Law

students and the charges, framed by modern law, included: murder, attempted murder, arson, bigamy and fraud. Crucially the actors had been given a case file with the relevant backstories and witness statements, but had not read the novel, allowing them to react more instinctively to the line of questioning. My favourite moment (regretfully edited out of the film) was the exchange between the prisoner and the prosecution in relation to the state of the well where the fateful encounter with George Talboys takes place. Asked if she knew the wood was rotten, an exasperated Lady Audley snapped back, "you don't think about health and safety when someone's verbally abusing you!" This kind of improvisation can be useful to students from both English and Law, challenging them to notice incongruities and gaps in the record.

For Creative Writing students, there is an obvious value to reading projects that tackle Victorian novels in parts - *The Heavenly Twins* is a very long book indeed. But we do not necessarily need to read "like a Victorian" to learn from the Victorians. A more radical approach is to play with the idea of unexpectedness by creating unscheduled pit stops. The twitter (X) account @bleakdickens generates new readings of *Bleak House* (1853) through random line breaks, determined by the standard character limit**:** "What does she mean by this look and this imploring gesture? Why does she come so close? What is the letter that she holds?" (17 January 2023). This micro-reading shows Dickens creating narrative suspense with a series of quick-fire questions. It also provides a wonderful writing prompt for students who have not read the novel itself.

Call to Action!

What these various projects demonstrate is the transferable potential of creative skills. It took a module in Early Modern authorship for one Creative and Professional Writing student to realise, "I don't have to know all the answers to make meaningful, creative choices" (Illman 2025: 4). Rather, working in this unfamiliar territory created new opportunities "to explore uncomfortable themes, confront historical legacies, and trust my creative process" (4). Opening up more creative spaces might be just what we all need, and the university campus offers a starting point for designing virtual "Museums of 'What if…?'" With a bit of imagination, it can be reframed as an interactive museum, offering an integrated, immersive experience across periods and disciplines.

My own university is positioned within a few minutes' walk of Canterbury cathedral, and the city was home to John Mychell's sixteenth-century printing press. Students have the opportunity to learn about Early Modern print culture and visit the cathedral archives. But if they really want to understand the tactile quality of letterpress as distinct from modern print, they need to handle an actual book. The university's special collections include books that can be passed around, weighed in the hand, and even sniffed if necessary. ICVWW are the proud owners of a fully operational, 1890s Minerva printing press. Students are encouraged to try it out for themselves, to gain a deeper understanding of the literary texts they are studying.

Not everyone wants to get ink and white spirit on their hands. But students of regional literature enjoy hearing that Somerset Maugham attended the King's School, less than a minute's walk from campus. Inspired by the account of hop-picking in *Of Human Bondage* (1915), they can find out just how easy it actually isn't. Because yes, the university really does make its own beer onsite. Overall's model of "walking like" a given character is an inspiring way to think about literary placemaking. The CCCU Sustainability Office also offers campus "wild tours," complete with creative prompts from colleagues including Bethany Climpson (a talented poet and one of our Creative and Professional Writing alumni).

Engaging with historic environments can offer further opportunities for researchers and students. Not every university campus has Victorian buildings, but most have features that can be mapped onto course reading. Trees may have been imported from other countries, sparking ideas about travel and empire. Have students considered how much work goes into the gardens? They might look more closely at the ubiquitous accounts of women gathering flowers and arranging them in bowls – what level of skill is implied, and how long do cut flowers last?

Creative Exercises for Victorianists: The Grangerised Text

This exercise is designed to focus attention on setting, reinvigorating those lengthy passages that students tend to skip as self-indulgent or irrelevant. Drawing on the idea of the tourist Interpreter, students select a scene from a Victorian text and identify specific material features: drainpipes, trees and flowerbeds, bay windows.

They need to find a building or location on campus, that can stand in for the fictional world. What would it feel like to behave in certain ways here: wait for someone who isn't coming (no phone checking); witness an incident and be nowhere near the police station; watch leaves fall after hearing bad news? Does what they see around them speak to affective prompts embedded in the fictional source? They should take photos of whatever strikes them as important. This close observation of an actual setting is a useful way to reveal the interpretive function of objects or places in the literary text.

Nineteenth-century readers were avid practitioners of extra-illustration, "grangerising" their books by pasting pictures or ephemera against particular passages. Gabrielle Dean argues that this practice anticipates modern, multi-directional strategies of reading in that:

> the tipped- and pasted-in additions do not visually re-create actions, things, people, or places represented in a text. Rather, as paper remnants of environments outside the book, they propose to summon those actions, things, people, or places, via documentary proxies.
>
> (2013: 58)

Students can use their "on location" photos to grangerise a passage or chapter, as the basis of a reflective assignment. The photos may not be period-specific, indeed they may seem incongruous when placed alongside the text. But these differences can be instructive: how does a PVC frame in a worker's cottage differ from a Victorian sash window? One answer is that it is less visually appealing, but provides better insulation and is cheaper to maintain. It is worth noting in this context that conversations about working-class life, and how it was repackaged for middle-class enjoyment, were already happening in the industrial novels of Elizabeth Gaskell.

Meta-responses can enable unexpected perspectives, challenging us to revisit what we think we already know and even to create new texts. In 2024 Bob Henderson (Library and Information Adviser at CCCU and former Deputy Editor of *Gay Times*) led a "Queering the Archive" project using KMO and ICVWW special collections. Staff and student volunteers worked together to create a zine called *Making Friends*, using collage techniques to reimagine the subtext of Victorian and early twentieth-century publishing. Print copies were distributed as part of the Canterbury Pride celebrations, and the pdf remains available online.

For the 2024 Being Human Festival, I worked with colleagues from the Canterbury Christ Church Creatives group, the Canterbury Forget-Me-Nots, and Kent Arts and Wellbeing, on an event called "Beach City Canterbury." Based on my research into Victorian resorts, the idea was to bring the Kent coast a few miles inland into a convenient community hall, for people living with dementia. The Creatives decorated the space as a seaside scene, complete

with beach hut bunting and crocheted lighthouses. Since the nineteenth century, sea air has been widely reputed to have health-giving properties, and psychologist Philip Ulrich brought in a diffuser filled with floral ozone as a reasonable alternative. Participants engaged in a range of wellbeing activities, from singing to making postcards. The Victorians were fascinated by their own interaction with holiday settings, studying the impact of sea bathing on mood and creating complex rules for clothing, behaviour and even conversation in different spaces. Singing music hall songs while standing next to a cathedral organist: not a problem. What else would one do by the sea? But having been asked to turn up in beachwear in November, I still blush (I mean that literally) when I think of my cropped trousers and socks combination.

Conclusion

I began by asking how English connects to Creative Writing, and how both map onto Heritage. I went on to argue that all these disciplines intersect, or speak in some way to the range of approaches collectively termed Creative Industries.

Whether we are visiting a historic house or reading a 3-decker novel, we instinctively look for clues and start to foreground and interrogate particular features. But what we see is not immutable, and an authorised edition is not the final word. Rather the museum curator and the scholarly editor respectively create narratives "from evidence that is otherwise inert. One does not 'allow' the archives to talk, one 'makes them talk'" (West 2011: 2).

In PhD supervisions I challenge students to keep asking themselves three impossible questions (not necessarily before breakfast) in relation to their own research:

> What are you looking at?
>
> How do you know?
>
> Why does it matter?

As Victorianists, we are in the business of accessing and interpreting the past. And like children, we gleefully take it apart to see how it is made. The 2025 Humanities Summit (held at the School of Advanced Study in London) focused on the theme of "collaboration," opening up debate about the barriers to working across and beyond our respective disciplines and challenging us to overcome them. Claiming a stake in interdisciplinary and immersive approaches is not just a strategic response to difficult times. It is a genuine opportunity to have new and exciting conversations.

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