A tale of two Dickenses: Or, learning as fact, fiction and play

David Rudrum
University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK

Abstract
Over the years, a small industry has sprung up dedicated to preserving writers’ homes and birthplaces, offering the chance to see first-hand the circumstances under which their key texts were written. Experiencing an insight into, say, Wordsworth’s Dove Cottage, or Hardy’s Wessex cottage, or the Bronte parsonage in Haworth, is widely held to be an educational experience, enhancing our appreciation of the link between the life and work of the author in question. Axiomatically – and simplistically – literary heritage sites like these might seem to offer the “truth” behind the “fiction”, by showing the visitor the “real” world behind the “imaginative” writing. Thus, the educational experience they offer is often said to consist in providing an insight into context (historical/biographical, landscape and setting, etc.). This study sets out to challenge this assumption. As case studies, it will discuss two very (very!) different literary heritage sites: the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum in Portsmouth and the now-defunct literary theme park Dickens World, which finally closed its doors in 2016. The former offers a biographical and historical interpretation of Dickens, ostensibly grounded in reality and truth – although the truth claims made for the museum are shown to be somewhat contestable. The latter appealed far more to the imagination, and to ‘free play’ with the text, than it did to truth. Obviously, these sites involve two completely different conceptions of what it is to provide an experience of literary education. The two are compared and contrasted, with passing reference to thinkers such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Kendall Walton and Mikhail Bakhtin, with a view to challenging and dismantling the commonsensical view that the educational value of literary heritage sites consists in revealing the truth behind the fiction.

Keywords
literary heritage, literary museums, literary houses, museum education, Charles Dickens

Of facts and furniture
To talk of Dickens in the context of an educational policy journal is inevitably to call to mind the schoolmasterly figure of Gradgrind – “Thomas Gradgrind, sir. A man of realities” – who, in the
opening pages of *Hard Times*, spells out clearly an educational policy that, Dickens says, derives from the thought of the best philosophers of his age. If it is rare for a classic novel to begin with a policy statement inspired by educational philosophy, it is rarer still for that policy to be so easily summarised:

Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir! (Dickens, 2015: p. 4)

In accordance with this principle, then, let me start out by outlining a simple Fact which I have discovered in the course of my research for this article: Charles Dickens could have had no idea of the house in which he was born. Later in life, he didn’t even recognise the place.

Dickens came into this world on 7th February 1812 at 13, Mile End Terrace, in the Landport area of Portsmouth (now 393 Old Commercial Road), and his family moved house sometime in June that year. So it seems unlikely that the 4-month-old Dickens would have done much more than suckling, burping, sleeping and crying before moving out of his birthplace. When, in 1866, Dickens arrived back in Portsmouth to give a reading, we have it on the authority of George Dolby, the manager who accompanied Dickens on his hugely successful reading tours, that they went for a stroll around the waterfront suburb of Southsea, where the following “amusing incident” took place:

On the morning after our arrival we set out for a walk, and turning the corner of a street suddenly, found ourselves in Landport Terrace. The name of the street catching Mr Dickens’s eye, he suddenly exclaimed, “By Jove! here is the place where I was born”; and, acting on his suggestion, we walked up and down the terrace for some time, speculating as to which of the houses had the right to call itself his cradle. Beyond a recollection that there was a small front garden to the house he had no idea of the place – for he was only two years old when his father was removed to London from Portsmouth. As the houses were nearly all alike, and each had a small front garden, we were not much helped in our quest by Mr Dickens’s recollections, and great was the laughter at his humorous conjectures. He must have lived in one house because “it looked so like his father”; another one must have been his home because it looked like the birthplace of a man who had deserted it; a third was very like the cradle of a puny, weak youngster such as he had been; and so on, through the row. … But as none of the houses in Landport Terrace could cry out and say, as he recounted these facts, “That boy was born here!” the mystery remained unsolved, and we passed on. (Dolby, 1912: p. 37–9)

So, plainly, Dickens had no clear mental images or recollections of his birthplace. But things are more complicated than this – and here follows my moment of Gradgrindery, a fact which I present here for (to the best of my knowledge) the first time.

Not only did Dickens not recognise his own birthplace, he was not even looking for it in the right neighbourhood. Dolby says that he and Dickens were wandering around Southsea when they came across Landport Terrace. Now: Landport Terrace in Southsea is a different address from Mile End Terrace in Landport, where the Dickens birthplace is. The two streets are a good mile apart, and around half an hour’s walk from each other. How can we explain this? Well, the Dickenses moved again, in December 1813, to a house in Wish Street, Southsea, when the toddler Dickens would have been old enough to form his earliest memories. I suggest we can deduce from this that Dickens got his first two addresses mixed up, and that his powers of recollection simply elided Mile End Terrace
in Landport with Wish Street in Southsea when he found himself on Landport Terrace, Southsea. Furthermore, we might surmise that his first recollections of being a small child in Southsea had led him to believe he’d actually been born there. He wasn’t.

If Dickens lived without any tangible memory of his birthplace and possibly went through life thinking he’d been born in another place altogether, then surely most reasonable people would concur that the house of his birth could have exerted precisely no influence of any kind whatsoever on his novels. And, since Dickens is known to posterity more or less entirely because of those novels, then surely most reasonable people would take the view that Dickens’s birthplace was an absolute irrelevance, of no conceivable interest at all to either the man or his works, and devoid, certainly, of any educational value. But in thinking this, we would be every bit as misguided as Thomas Gradgrind. The Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum in Portsmouth welcomed over 13,000 visitors through its doors during 2012, his bicentennial year.

Surely we don’t need to be card-carrying Gradgrindians to wonder what the purpose or the point of such a visit could be. The most straightforward answer would be that it involves an educational experience – and, indeed, many of the visitors to similar literary heritage sites are schoolchildren on organised field trips. But this answer is straightforward only deceptively: what is meant here by this phrase “an educational experience”? What is it that is taught or learnt by visiting a site such as this? Is it an exercise in biography, detailing fact? Is it an attempt to deepen the appreciation of fiction – as it were the pursuit of literary criticism by other means? Or is it something else altogether? How does it contribute to what we might call a literary education?

Let’s undertake a simple thought experiment. Imagine for a moment that new research demonstrated unambiguously that the body we call Napoleon’s wasn’t his – that the man who lived on Saint Helena in the years following Waterloo and died there in 1821 must have been an impostor, a double. Or, suppose a newly discovered document revealed that, at the very last minute, Emperor Hirohito had ordered Admiral Yamamoto to abort the attack on Pearl Harbor. In either of these cases, our knowledge and appreciation of history would have changed. For some people, it would have changed immeasurably, and for others, only infinitesimally, but things would have changed. However, is the same thing true of literary history? Has my discovery of the fact that Charles Dickens thought we was born in the wrong neighbourhood made any difference to our knowledge and appreciation of his novels? Probably not. As Michel Foucault puts it in his oft-cited essay “What is an Author?”: “If I discover that Shakespeare was not born in the house that we visit today, this is a modification which, obviously, will not alter the functioning of the author’s name. But if we proved that Shakespeare did not write those sonnets which pass for his, that would constitute a significant change and affect the manner in which the author’s name functions” (Foucault, 1991: p. 106). From this, we can hypothesis that literary heritage sites have a very different, and perhaps even problematic, relationship with knowledge compared with other heritage sites. If a visit to (for example) the Martin Luther King Jr birthplace in Atlanta, Georgia yields the visitor any kind of insight into the man himself, it has done its job – it has delivered an educational experience. But the same is not necessarily true of the Dickens birthplace, because traditionally, the object of a literary education is the text, not the author.

Curiously, the thousands of visitors that come to the Dickens birthplace each year come to see a house with almost nothing in it connected to the Dickenses. Rather, the house has been decorated and furnished in a style appropriate to the tastes and the budget of a Regency era family of the lower middle classes, so as to give an impression of what the house could have looked like at the time Dickens was born in it. The trouble with such an approach is, of course, that no one knows for sure what John and Elizabeth Dickens’s views on interior design really were. Accordingly, the interpretative text panels describing the rooms tend to use phrases like “may have” or “might well have”
rather often, and the result, when considered from an educational viewpoint, is a strange combination. There are lots of in-depth, detailed descriptions of hand-printed wallpapers and dark wooden items of furniture, which all sound knowledgeable and build up an authoritative tone – only to undercut the respect they command by stating that the Dickenses “might well have” owned similar things or “may have” bought their houseware from the same shop. In short, most of the interpretative text through which a factual, biographical insight might be conveyed is in effect a guarded admission that no one can say what the house actually looked like at the time Dickens was born. What, then, is the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum a museum of?

It is not simply a museum of second-rate furniture and middle-class taste in the Regency era because it turns out that many of the carpets, wallpapers and furnishings are in fact (as the interpretative text panels inform us) “reproductions”. Nor is it altogether clear why these specific items were chosen as significant enough to make replicas of them, when there must be any number of other genuine artefacts from the same period that could be displayed instead – but whatever the reason, none has any apparent direct connection to Dickens or to his parents. As far as providing a literary education goes, this seems rather odd. To help illuminate its strangeness, I propose another thought experiment. Imagine that, in 200 years’ time, some well-meaning curators will be trying to reconstruct random items from the IKEA catalogue in order to give an impression of what the birthplace of a soon-to-be famous writer born in the early 21st century might have looked like. If this seems facetious or absurd, let us reflect that the odds of a 21st century novelist having at least some IKEA furniture in their home are pretty high. Admittedly, IKEA furniture might yield, perhaps by some kind of synecdoche, an insight into the culture that produces it – a throwaway culture of disposability parading itself under the guise of such questionable virtues as flexibility and portability, all glossed over by the word “convenience”. There is indeed much that an article of furniture can reveal about the broader culture behind it. But what in all this could count as a literary education? Unless, per accidens, the 21st century author’s writings dwelt specifically on detailed descriptions of furniture, it does not seem like a very effective way to go about inculcating an appreciation of literature, let alone an enthusiasm for it.

At the same time, however, the IKEA thought experiment can be pursued in more radical directions, for what is the difference between, say, a bookcase that once belonged to a famous writer, and an identical reproduction of that bookcase produced years later, with no celebrity connections? Is the difference the same difference as the difference between the mass-produced urinal Marcel Duchamp turned into a piece of readymade art by labelling it with the signature R. Mutt? Not quite, since Duchamp was perfectly self-aware about what it was he was doing, while, by contrast, few people are cocksure enough to be self-aware about which of their personal effects should be exhibited to a paying public years after their death. Duchamp, that is, was building on an established practice, not that different from when a writer on a reading tour, as was Dickens, signs a handful of mass-produced books each night to single them out from the thousands of unsigned ones. This gives us a clue: what is important about these otherwise unremarkable objects is that ghostly hint of what was once authorial presence but is now irrevocable absence – something akin to what Derrida or Levinas might call the trace.1 The power of the trace – the idea of accessing the presence of the absent – is one of the most powerful bases for literary tourism, and it helps explain why the idea of using any old IKEA bookcase to illuminate a writer’s life and works seems counterintuitive.

To give a more specific example: one of very few items in the house where Dickens was born that has a direct connection to the writer himself is, oxymoronically, the chaise longue on which he died in 1870. (Hence, the museum is one of very few literary heritage sites that can claim to offer a cradle-to-grave perspective). It is difficult not to be moved by this chaise longue: however many more just like it might have been made, none was this one-and-only chaise longue, on which Dickens breathed
his last. No wonder then, that in the early days of the literary heritage phenomenon, a metaphysical vocabulary of spiritual transcendence attached itself to visiting a literary heritage site: the practice has long been seen as analogous to a “pilgrimage” to a “shrine” to see the “relics” of one of the great authors of the “canon”. The link to saintliness is interesting to note but, in the case of the Dickens birthplace, seems strangely misplaced because it is a strange shrine that consists not of relics but of reproductions of things a saint’s parents might once have owned. Moreover, from an educational point of view, it is arguably unhelpful: these quasi-religious connotations mean that literary heritage sites teach us a reverence for the Author-God that Roland Barthes for one might find counterproductive.2

Educationally, there is, of course, nothing wrong with using replicas, models and reproductions. It is a necessary practice, often preferable to using “the thing itself”. It is hard to imagine what can be taught or learnt from one IKEA bookcase that can’t be taught or learnt from any one of the millions of others identical to it. The point is, surely, that what is being taught has nothing to do with a literary education: what is being taught is rather some version of history. Herein lies the educational value of the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum. The Dickens connection links it to a household name and gives it human interest, but what it teaches us is actually social history. Up in the attic, for example, is a display of a range of reproduced documents from the early 19th century, photocopied and laminated so you can handle them and inspect them closely, which go into fascinating detail about the house and the neighbourhood at the time of Dickens’s birth. These include copies of census returns, maps of the district showing what the area was like at the time, baptism records from the church where Dickens was christened and rate books from the parish. You can see who his neighbours were, what they did for a living, and how much they earned. They even have the original rent book for the house itself, which shows – remarkably – that although the rent should have been comfortably affordable for a white collar worker like Dickens’s father (John Dickens was a clerk in the Royal Navy Pay Office), the Dickenses nevertheless often fell badly behind with their rent. These things teach us a great deal. But, as interesting as they may be in providing biographical context, what they teach us is history. And that, too, is what the reproduction furniture teaches us: the adjustable wooden screen by the fireside in the parlour, designed to protect the pale complexions of Regency ladies from the heat of the flames, is there to tell us about the socio-economic background to the Dickens family, and not about Dickens’s novels.

Put in these terms, then, perhaps the real question is not about the relevance of a visit to see replicas of furniture the author’s parents probably never owned, in a house the author did not have any memory of, to a literary education. It becomes rather whether this is any less useful educationally than a visit to see the real things an author actually owned. What literary appreciation is conveyed by the trace of the writer? Jane Austen’s writing desk is proudly displayed in the British Library and is clearly a firm favourite with visitors. But what insight does it yield into Pride and Prejudice or Sense and Sensibility? What insight does it yield that looking at any other writing desk of the time would not? What does it teach us that a modern-day replica cannot? These questions recall Barnes’s (1984) well-known novel Flaubert’s Parrot. In it, an amateur yet obsessive Flaubert enthusiast named Geoffrey Braithwaite is beguiled and bewildered by the fact that both the Flaubert museum in Rouen and Flaubert’s house in Croisset each have on display a stuffed parrot, and both claim that theirs is the one and only, authentic, genuine stuffed parrot that sat on Flaubert’s desk and served as a model for Felicité’s pet parrot Loulou in the short story Un Coeur Simple. Baffled and intrigued, Geoffrey sets out on a personal quest to discover which of the two is the impostor. One of the first things he does is to re-read the passage where Flaubert describes the parrot, whereupon he’s dismayed to discover that the description fits neither. Given Flaubert’s reputation as the master realist, it’s easy to understand Geoffrey’s disappointment. But it nevertheless raises some
troublesome questions. Does the lack of correspondence between the parrot and the prose detract from Flaubert’s realism, or does it enhance his gift of fabulation? If the parrot had looked just the way Flaubert described it, what would that say about Flaubert’s talents of imagination, creativity, invention – about his abilities to craft fiction, rather than to transcribe cold hard Gradgrindian fact? What insight is it that we hope to gain from looking at an author’s belongings?

Over the years, a small industry has sprung up dedicated to preserving writers’ homes, belongings, and birthplaces, offering the chance to see first-hand the circumstances under which their key texts were written. Axiomatically – and simplistically – literary heritage sites like these might seem to offer the “truth” behind the “fiction”, by showing the visitor the “real” world behind the “imaginative” writing. That is why visiting, say, Wordsworth’s Dove Cottage, or Hardy’s Wessex cottage, or the Bronte parsonage in Haworth, is widely held to be an educational experience, enhancing our appreciation of the link between the life and the work of the author in question. Thus far, the example of the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum has given us to see that providing a biographical and historical interpretation of Dickens, ostensibly grounded in reality and fact, does not provide the kind of educational experience that reveals the truth behind the fiction. But that is not simply because the truth claims made for this particular museum might be contestable. It is rather because an insight into contextual factors offers a grounding in fact, and this – pace Gradgrind – is arguably not the best way to approach educating people about fiction.

**Of fiction and play**

For a different approach, let us turn instead to the character who Dickens offers as a counterpoint to Mr Gradgrind in *Hard Times* – to Mr Sleary, the circus master. Whereas Mr Gradgrind fetishises facts, Mr Sleary valorises something rather different: his catchphrase is “People must be amused” (Dickens, 2015: p. 66). This motto was adopted as a slogan by a very different literary heritage site: the now-defunct literary theme park Dickens World, at Chatham in Kent, which, before it finally closed its doors in 2016, was ranked by *Time* magazine among the world’s “top ten weirdest theme parks” (Rawlings, 2012). Dickens World was a very different literary tourist attraction, and the educational experience it offered contrasted sharply with that on offer in the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum. Dickens World was a family theme park that did not base itself primarily around educational insight into the writer’s life. Instead, it tried to offer an experience of entering into his works themselves. As a reviewer for the *New York Times* put it:

> It promised to be an “authentic” re-creation of the London of Charles Dickens’s novels, complete with soot, pickpockets, cobblestones, gas lamps, animatronic Dickens characters and strategically placed chemical “smell pots” that would, when heated, emit odours of offal and rotting cabbage. Its centrepiece was the *Great Expectations* boat ride, which started in a rat-infested creek, flew over the Thames, snaked through a graveyard and splashed into a sewer (Anderson, 2012).

According to their Web site, you could “come face to face with some of Dickens’ literary characters in our magnificent rendition of a Victorian town churchyard”. Or, you could watch a 4-D film in Peggotty’s Boat House. A stern Victorian schoolmaster in a classroom based on Dotheboys Hall from *Nicholas Nickleby* would put you through your paces in a quiz about Dickens, punishing and humiliating those whose knowledge wasn’t up to scratch. Fagin’s Den awaited (and I quote) “the little scallywags up to the height of 1.45 m” who wished to cavort in this soft play area.3

From the start, Dickens World was divisive. One journalist likened it to “the thought experiment of a radical Marxist seeking to expose the terminal bankruptcy at the heart of consumerism”, and, as the best thought experiments do, it threw up questions which could be taken in contradictory directions: “Was it a homage to, or a desecration of, the legacy of Charles Dickens? Was it the
reinvention of, or the cheapening of, our culture’s relationship to literature?” (Anderson, 2012). Its sternest critics tended to be Dickens scholars – and this despite the participation of specialist consultants like Thelma Grove, formerly an officer of the Dickens Fellowship. The charge they levelled most forcefully was the allegation that Dickens World amounted to a “dumbing down” of Dickens’s novels; arguing for the defence, Kathryn Hughes, herself an authority on the Victorian era, denied in detail worth quoting at length that it entailed any such thing:

what strikes you as you walk through Dickens World is the obviously detailed knowledge of the author’s life and works which inform the enterprise. This is not Dickens “lite”, a soft-focus sketch of the author’s most crowd-pleasing creations such as Fagin or Uriah Heep. Rather, you will find references to characters whose details might tax the resources of even the most committed Dickens-phile. Noah Catchpole, Miss Mowcher, Sir Mulberry Hawk and the Christmas Goblins all put in appearances. … This same detailed knowledge is apparent in Dickens World’s rendering of Dickens’s own life. “Warren’s Blacking Factory” [is] one of the first things the visitor encounters on entering the site, but the biographical narrative extends far beyond such well-known punctuation points. As well as meeting John Dickens in the Marshalsea, visitors observe the stormy first sea crossing to America in 1842 that so prostrated Kate Dickens. We also see the Staplehurst crash, complete with an illicit Nellie Ternan. … Instead of being given a timeline for him, perhaps posted on the wall museum-style, we meet the novelist in a variety of guises at key moments of his life. The first piece of biographical data comes in the form of “Warren’s Blacking Factory”, represented by a piece of scenery in the central courtyard. There is nothing to instruct us in its significance, since the implication is that its overwhelming formative importance in Dickens’s psyche needs no further explication. The fact that the blacking factory is a theatrical “flat”, representing a space which we are unable to enter, gestures also towards the fact that this remained a private and shameful episode in Dickens’s emotional and creative life, one which he was able to share with the public only in coded form when he consigned young David Copperfield to a similar fate. (Hughes, 2010: p. 389–90)

What is noteworthy about this description is how it shows that the facts of Dickens’s life are not held apart from his fiction – indeed, the two intermingle, as the actors who embody them physically interact with one another.

As its flipside, the dumbing down argument has a built-in counterargument about accessibility: Dickens scholar Thelma Grove defended her support for the project on grounds that “anything that can introduce aspects of his work to a modern audience is going to be good. I would hope it would encourage people to look at the books” (as quoted in Lydall, 2005). Her view was endorsed and closely echoed, by no less a voice than the distinguished literary critic John Carey: “anything that draws people’s attention to Dickens is good because it makes it likelier that they will try reading him” (as quoted in Hart, 2007). These voices claimed to enlist Dickens on their side: Dickens himself was all in favour of the popularisation of literature, culture and politics, in ways that eschewed dumbing down and populism. But it is important to note that this counterargument comes to an end at its very first move. In Juliet John’s words: “Dickens World … claims to make more people aware of Dickens and his novels and to provide entertainment, but there its claims stop” (John, 2008: p. 7). Although arguments relating to education can be made both for and against it – it does or does not oversimplify Dickens; it may or may not introduce new readers to Dickens – we should be careful to note that Dickens World did not market itself as an educational experience of any kind. Indeed, let us recall its motto and remember how Mr Sleary continues his observation about the need for people to be amuthed: “they can’t be alwayth a learning”, he remarks (Dickens, 2015: p. 67).
Slearyism notwithstanding, one cannot help suspecting that the allegation of “dumbing down” is underpinned by a certain puritanical objection to amusement – or, more precisely, to mere amusement, to amusement that does not engage the mental or cultural faculties. The basic concept of using Dickens’s life and works as the basis for what we call (in British English) an amusement park led more or less instantly to objections to “the ‘Disneyfication’ of Dickens”. The point is ill-phrased, given that the mawkishness and sentimentality of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* out-Disneys anything in the Disney *oeuvre*. And what is *Great Expectations* if not a Victorian “Disneyfication” of *Cinderella*, with a deranged and twisted fairy godmother? The anxiety around Disneyfication betrays the groundless fears about the commercialisation or the Americanisation of Dickens (or both), neither of which need detain us here because they do not pertain to the matters at hand. The term seems to suggest that literature and theme parks should not mix – and yet the literary theme park is an interesting phenomenon.

The world-famous Wizarding World of Harry Potter franchise is probably the literary theme park’s best-known example. But fans of Beatrix Potter, besides making the pilgrimage to her National Trust-owned house at Hill Top in the Lake District, can have an experience something similar to that on offer at Dickens World at the World of Beatrix Potter Attraction in Bowness. You can amble through Peter Rabbit’s garden, Mrs Tiggy Winkle’s kitchen, Jemima Puddleduck’s woodland glade, Mr Tod’s underground den, Jeremy Fisher’s pond, Mr MacGregor’s Greenhouse and so on. Medievalists can take in the Canterbury Tales Visitor Attraction, described by the *Mail* (in terms that, to my ear, sound like damning with faint praise) as one of the six must do things in Canterbury (Davies, 2010). What these sites seem to be doing is connecting us with literature through some form of play.

There is, within literary theory, a long-established tradition – best exemplified, perhaps, in the work of Kendall Walton – of connecting the concept of fiction to the idea of make-believe found in the world of play:

> In order to understand paintings, plays, films, and novels, we must look first at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks, and teddy bears. The activities in which representational works of art are embedded and which give them their point are best seen as continuous with children’s games of make-believe. Indeed, I advocate regarding these activities as games of make-believe themselves (Walton, 1990: p. 11).

On this view, reading fiction is analogous to imaginative play, and if what is on offer at Dickens World is also a form of imaginative play, it follows that reading a Dickens novel might not in itself be that different an activity from visiting Dickens World. This has important implications. If, as Walton has it, “What is true is to be believed; what is fictional is to be imagined” (Walton, 1990: p. 41), then arguably a literary education consists, or ought to consist, in nurturing the powers of the imagination and not in the mastery of Gradgrindian fact.

Looked at from this viewpoint, the educational claims made for Dickens World might start to seem excessively modest. Dickens World offered an immersive experience in which visitors got to participate in the bringing of a fictional world to life. It tried, perhaps, to educate the imagination, which is perhaps harder, and certainly rarer, for literary heritage sites to attempt than the standard biographical-historical approach. “Traditional literary tourism sites”, such as the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum, “can inculcate visitors with a reassuring sense that they are witnessing the historical past and can therefore foster intellectual passivity about historical change and the processes of writing or representing history” (John, 2008: p. 18). Dickens World stands as a rebuke to this complacent intellectual passivity: in Kathryn Hughes’s words, “Dickens World is a realm able to accommodate almost limitless versions of its key narratives”, and consequently “There could
hardly be a stronger reminder that what we are looking at, far from being an authoritative recall of Dickens’s life, is actually a commentary on the impossibility of ever achieving it” (Hughes, 2010: p. 392, p. 390). So, even for the most biographically minded of Dickens scholars, there is at the very least an argument to be had that taking their students to Dickens World would have made more sense educationally than a visit to his birthplace because a theme park can hardly be said to give a misleading account of Dickens’s early years, since it makes no claims to truth or accuracy in the first place.

The claim that the Dickens World experience entailed a form of literary education need not rest upon Walton’s celebrated analogy between fiction and imaginative play. Even if one rejects this analogy, there are plenty of other grounds, rooted in different approaches to literary theory, for arguing in defence of Dickens World. Lofty poststructuralist academics, inspired by Derridean deconstruction, used to advocate what they called free play with the text – this is more or less what happened in Dickens World. “Put simply (and crudely), Dickens World gives us post-structuralist Dickens”, Hughes surmises (Hughes, 2010: p. 392). If one feels uncomfortable describing a visit to a theme park as free play (perhaps on grounds that theme parks tend to be well choreographed and to shepherd visitors according to a predesigned plan), then even the concept of play itself is not essential to arguing the educational value of Dickens World. After all, less theoretically minded literature scholars have been embracing the Death of the Author and the Intentional Fallacy for a good half century, and for them, it could easily be argued that visiting a site that aims to bring to life a writer’s creative vision is a sound activity compared with visiting a shrine steeped in biography. “The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author”, Roland Barthes famously claimed (Barthes, 1977: p. 148). No doubt he’d have preferred Dickens World to Dickens’s birthplace.

Moreover, it is not as if hostility towards author-centric literary criticism is a prerequisite for endorsing the educational value of Dickens World. Hughes notes how “Dickens’s characters appear to have become untethered from their texts, even from their creator’s control” (Hughes, 2010: p. 391). Indeed, she finds this apt, as if Dickens World has managed to encapsulate something characteristic of Dickens’s novels, something traditional approaches to literary criticism and literary heritage are unable to bring to light. “It is this ability of Dickens to grant his characters what feels like a consciousness independent of his own that makes his fictions seem polyvalent and therefore so ripe for the different kinds of renderings on offer at Dickens World” (Hughes, 2010: p. 392). She makes a brief, passing reference to the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, which deserves expanding on here. For Bakhtin, the 19th century saw the invention of the polyphonic novel, with its “plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (Bakhtin, 1973: p. 4). Remarkably, Bakhtin’s description of the architectonics of the polyphonic novel is a description that could be applied more or less directly to the experience of wandering through Dickens World:

It is not a multitude of characters and fates within a unified objective world, illuminated by the author’s unified consciousness that unfold his work, but precisely the plurality of equal consciousnesses and their worlds, which are combined here into the unity of a given event, while at the same time retaining their unmergedness (Bakhtin, 1973: p. 4).

The voice of Charles Dickens, that is, was just one voice, one presence, among many others with no less autonomy or validity – the others including his characters and his readers/visitors – who all interacted on an equal footing in Dickens World. Indeed, Dickens did not even have one unitary voice, since visitors met different Dickenses at different stages of his life at different stages of the visit. Dickens World was a veritably Bakhtopian place.
So far, then, we have been able to enlist philosophers Kendall Walton and Jacques Derrida, literary theorists Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin, and the “New Critics” W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley (albeit only nominally, in appealing to the “intentional fallacy”) to indicate the many different ways in which Dickens World could be said to amount to a literary education. So much for the idea that visiting a theme park involves dumbing things down. Indeed, given that so many different ways of interacting with (dare one say “different ways of reading?”) Dickens World were on offer to the visitor, arguably its greatest educational value consisted in its allowing visitors, heuristically, to discover for themselves the benefits of approaching fiction with an open-minded critical pluralism:

Rather than attempt to offer a direct path back to a stable and anterior world demonstrably inhabited by the novelist, they dramatize the impossibility of that project, the impotence of the desire that drives it and in the process reveal alternative ways of representing [Dickens’s] life and work. This [is a] refusal to pretend that there is a single, master-narrative available to those who acquire sufficient knowledge (Hughes, 2010: p. 390).

And this, surely, is what a literary education ought to consist of: not teaching “the” “truth” “behind” “the” “fiction” (each of those terms so fraught that bookshelves have been filled in contesting them, hence, the scare quotes), but of getting people to see that, however, they might imagine or interpret or engage with fiction, there are always other ways of imagining it, interpreting it and engaging with it.

In fairness, the highbrow critique of the “Disneyfication” process was also, at its most incisive, an objection to a one-sided presentation of Dickens. The reference to Disney was a way of framing fears about the sanitisation of Dickens, the editing out of the darker, grittier side of his works. “It is the trivialising of the social issues Dickens cared so passionately about that is the most disturbing”, wrote Judith Flanders, “it is the domestication, the taming of the wildness and fierceness of Dickens that I object to” (Flanders, 2007). These fears were not ill-founded. “In response to criticisms of its lack of social realism, … [the Managing Director] Kevin Christie concedes that ‘Visitors are not going to come here to be depressed so our role is to entertain them. We are not going to have starving babies crawling around on the cobblestones’” (John, 2008: p. 7–8). Clearly, he understood his target market: “even if it were possible to create a lavish simulacrum of 1850s London – with its typhus and cholera and clouds of toxic corpse gas, its sewage pouring into the Thames and its average life span of 27 years – why would anyone want to visit?”, asked the New York Times, not unreasonably (Anderson, 2012). Although the journalist soon backpedalled on this point, finding Dickens World, if anything, too gruesome for children (“I saw at least two severed heads”), partly because its re-enactment of the ending of Oliver Twist retained the murder of Nancy and Bill Sykes’s subsequent death by hanging, this does not invalidate objections to the way that Dickens World edited out the issues that inspired Dickens to become a Social Justice Warrior. We may well ask, then, whether a genuinely multifaceted, critically pluralistic encounter with Dickens’s world is readily compatible with the child-friendly family experience of Dickens World.

One way to go about approaching an answer would be to consider how Dickens World embedded a form of Dickens education into a visit. It did this by incorporating one of the grimmest of Dickensian settings: Wackford Squeers’s schoolroom from the brutal Dotheboys Hall of Nicholas Nickleby. The atrocious conditions in which children were kept at cheap boarding schools, including malnutrition and corporal punishment that could cripple them for life, were the cause that Dickens turned to straight after the success of Oliver Twist in crusading against the Poor Law by exposing the scandalous goings-on in workhouses. Thus, Dickens World incorporated some of Dickens’s most vehement campaigning for reform into the most explicitly educational part of the visit. For Flanders, no doubt, this would count as an example of the “trivialising” and “domestication” that she objects
to. True, nobody who visited Dickens World was actually going to be beaten or starved by (the actor playing the part of) Squeers. But neither were readers of *Nicholas Nickleby*. True, the bullying and public humiliation of visitors to the schoolroom was done tongue-in-cheek and played for laughs: “Dickens World self-consciously announces its parodic status” (John, 2008: p. 18). But Dickens was – and is – famous and loved because his grotesque caricatures are, like Squeers, brilliantly comical. Thus, in poking fun at the inhumanity of the Victorian schoolmaster, Dickens World did just what Dickens did in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

The schoolroom featured a Dickens Quiz, done on interactive electronic tablets, and the standard of Dickens knowledge required was pretty high. Kathryn Hughes warned that “when it comes to answering questions in the interactive School Room you will need to keep your wits about you. Having Hablot Browne’s name to hand will help, as will knowing that Dickens once edited *Bentley’s Miscellany*” (Hughes, 2010: p. 389). If it put even scholars and academic researchers of the 19th century through their paces, it is hard to see how this could be seen as dumbing down. There is, perhaps, a more general objection to the trivialisation of the intellect implicit in the form of a quiz, whereby, as Jean-Francois Lyotard put it, “knowledge is a matter for TV games” (Lyotard, 1984: p. 76), but this has nothing to do with Dickens per se. Moreover, such objections overlook the huge potential and importance of gamification for education, a vast issue which there is no scope to broach here. Indeed, by taking the gamification of a literary education beyond the digital and into the world of the physical, I would argue that Dickens World was ahead of the field. It’s interesting to note that some traditional literary heritage sites (Samuel Johnson’s house in London, the Bronte Parsonage in Haworth, and Jane Austen’s house in Chawton, for example) provide period costumes for visitors to dress up in during the visit. To the best of my knowledge, this has not raised awkward questions about dumbing down or trivialisation. Perhaps this is because when play like this happens in a real place with a factual history, it is seen as some kind of in-built guarantee of educational value, or perhaps of highbrow status. Why reality and fact should carry automatic relevance in the study of literary fiction, though, is quite unclear.

**Of education and imagination**

The dichotomy I have sought to establish in the previous two sections – between Gradgrind and Sleary, between fact as historical reality and fiction as imaginative play – may well strike many as reductive. Surely, it will be claimed, there is such a thing as using play to engage with the historical past. Stay long enough at any visit to a ruined castle and you will see a child galloping around on an imaginary horse pretending to be a knight, with a sword in hand, just bought from the gift shop. Surely, too, the historical past can fire the imagination. My last visit to the British Museum happened to coincide with an object-handling session in which I got to hold a Neolithic flint axe-head that fit so snugly into my palm that I marvelled at whoever might have knapped it 6000 years ago having just the same sized hands as me; naturally, it fired my imagination, as I tried to envision what life was like for such people, so long ago. Surely, furthermore, these examples are both examples of a form of education, or at least have educational potential.

It is not part of my argument to refute any of this. It is merely to remind us that the life of a medieval knight as imagined by a child and the life of a Neolithic flint-knapper as imagined by an adult are fictions of our respective inventions. These fictions may foster an interest in historical fact, or make it more accessible, or enhance empathy with those who lived in times long past, and these are all important and laudable educational aims for any history teacher. But they are not quite history. Though it is a truism to say that historians invariably resort to using their imaginations, nevertheless the study of a purely imaginary past is emphatically not history. In that sense, perhaps,
it could be argued that deep down, the Charles Dickens Birthplace Museum is no different from Dickens World, since it, too, constructs an imaginary past that “may have” or “might well have” been completely inaccurate, hence fictional. The principal distinction between the two would then be that at least Dickens World had the virtue of honesty – and yet it was Dickens World that was accused, by educationalists, of distorting Dickens. Once again, the odds seem forever stacked against the (openly) fictional, in favour of the (pseudo-)factual.

It is worth noting that, in Britain alone, there are well over 70 writers’ museums, houses and birthplaces – enough to count as a small industry. But there is only a tiny handful of literary theme parks, mostly aimed at children. It is not the purpose of this discussion to evaluate whether this is a deplorable imbalance, or just as it should be. Rather, the point is that the literary heritage industry has clearly opted for fact, biography and history and largely ignored the possibilities of fiction, imagination and play. By way of edging towards a conclusion, then, the main questions at stake are summarised thus by Juliet John:

is Dickens World of any educational value? Dickens, after all, partly valued “amusements” for their own sake and partly for their ability to facilitate an holistic educational process: does Dickens World teach visitors anything? Does it even, as supporters have hoped, turn visitors onto Dickens’s novels? (John, 2008: p. 13)?

Now that Dickens World has closed its doors forever, it is, unfortunately, impossible to design a study that could aim at empirical answers to these questions. All we can do is go by the assessment of John herself – although her sample size (her 8-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son) was too small to be statistically significant, and her expertise as a Dickens scholar might be argued to have predisposed that sample group in non-representative directions, or even to have compromised the objectivity of her observations. Nevertheless, it is worth quoting in detail from her findings, however non-scientific they may be:

My children had not been bored throughout the whole visit, and as cultural heritage sites do not generally hold the attention of young children for long, this was a significant achievement. Visitors were not asked to take on board too much information; the emphasis was on experience (albeit simulated, performative experience), rather than on knowledge. My daughter’s verdict was succinct: “That was good”. When I fished for a more analytical response, she said that it was more interesting than an “old-fashioned museum” and that she had learned more, because instead of being “told things”, you were able to feel how things were in “olden times”. … [H]er assumption that what she had learned from the visit was what it was like really to live in “olden times” in some ways validates objections to Dickens World: for the Chatham visitor attraction is clearly not “authentic” in any literal way, and if she had not learned what it was like in “olden times”, what had she learned? … What Dickens World did perhaps teach them is that Dickens and the Victorians could be fun and that “olden times” were not incompatible with progress and technology. This is not the same as conveying to them the complex and multi-faceted nature of Dickens’s novels, but … helps to offset the familiar stereotype of Dickens and the Victorians as earnest, depressing and focused on social problems rather than social solutions. (John, 2008: p. 13–14)

What strikes me as interesting about these observations is that whereas an 8-year-old girl singled out the “feel” of Dickens World as its best feature, an academic specialist in Victorian literature seems compelled to worry about the historical, factual, authenticity of the “feel” of the place. Clearly, Juliet John is no Gradgrind – her insightful article on Dickens World is tremendously sympathetic to what it tries to achieve. Yet her words reveal the strong pull of the historical and the
factual in literary education: it is present even in the world of play, make-believe, fantasy and fiction that is a literary theme park. Her daughter’s words, by contrast, suggest that Dickens World did what Dickens’s novels do, and what a literary education is often said to do: to teach us, through our imaginations, to feel.

As a literary scholar, it is all too tempting to be dismissive or even contemptuous of places like the Wizarding World of Harry Potter, the World of Beatrix Potter Attraction, the Canterbury Tales Visitor Attraction and, of course, Dickens World. But from an educational point of view, we should not disregard the phenomenon of the literary theme park high-mindedly. Yes, the two Potters, Harry and Beatrix, are children’s literature, but Charles Dickens is not, and neither is Geoffrey Chaucer. We should not automatically assume that they are aimed only at children. At the risk of taking their marketing too naively, at face value, they offer an experience for the whole family. Perhaps it may be easier to teach a child an appreciation of Dickens’s characters than of his biographical circumstances, but would that make the latter the more urgent, the more impressive? Conversely, would teaching grown adults to reconnect with the world of make believe and play through the lens of Dickens’s fiction be a more remarkable achievement than getting them to pore over glass cases and text panels in a traditional museum? Would it be more remarkable than teaching children about Dickens’s fiction through the world of make believe and play they already inhabit? We do no favours to literary education by assuming the answers to such questions are self-evident or straightforward. And we do literature itself a disservice by accepting a world in which “to stand up for Dickens World is tantamount to admitting one’s stupidity and vulgarity; to oppose it risks announcing one’s elitism” (John, 2008: p. 8). This is a world with which Dickens himself, for whom the novel’s ability to entertain the masses was just what made it the perfect vehicle for educating them, would have had precisely no truck.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
David Rudrum https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4592-6515

Notes
1. What Derrida means by the trace is notoriously difficult to summarise, since he frequently insists that defining it is impossible. Perhaps its clearest articulation can be found in Derrida, (2016): pp. 50–51. Levinas’s sense of the trace is subtly different. A recent summary of its key features and the debates it raises can be found in Morgan, (2019).
2. For a historical account of how the practice of visiting literary heritage sites came to take this strange, metaphysical form, see Watson, (2006).
3. http://www.dickensworld.co.uk/take-a-tour.php. Accessed 15th June 2019.
4. These fears are ill-founded on both counts. America has always loved Dickens: when he visited New York in 1842, fans mobbed him in the streets, and barbers reportedly sold locks of hair they claimed were his. And Dickens loved America, if less ardently. As for commercialisation, the literary journal Dickens owned, ran
and edited, was among the most commercially successful of the time and was not above taking revenue from advertising; Dickens wrote journalism for the popular press as well as finely-crafted novels; he embarked on lucrative reading tours to packed theatres; he profited from theatrical plays that adapted his novels and artistic prints that illustrated them; he was among the first novelists to exploit the possibilities of merchandising in the modern sense. That he wrote novels specifically for the American market ties the two points together neatly. There was never an uncommercial Dickens. It is apt that the street on which he was born was renamed Old Commercial Road.

5. Bakhtin seems at one time to have regarded the polyphonic novel as the invention of Dostoevsky, writing slightly later than Dickens’s early work, but nevertheless overlapping his career. Elsewhere, however, he argues that the form of the novel itself was always already polyphonic. Either way, a visit to a Dostoevsky World would probably be worth the price of admission.

6. Those interested in the literary heritage phenomenon and its evolution would do well to read Nicola J. Watson’s recent The Author’s Effects: On Writer’s House Museums. This book is likely to dominate the field for as far as the horizon of the foreseeable can stretch (Watson, 2020).

7. No doubt there will be some educationalists who therefore regard my interest in Dickens World as somewhat quixotic. If so, that is a badge I wear with honour, not just because there was always something wonderfully quixotic about Dickens World itself, but, more importantly, because the very word ‘quixotic’ draws attention to the power of literature in transforming the everyday world of fact, truth and reality through its appeal to the imagination. A visit to a Cervantes World would most certainly be worth the price of admission.

References

Anderson S (2012) The World of Charles Dickens, Complete With Pizza Hut. New York Times.
Bakhtin MM (1973) [1929] Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, trans. R. W. Rotsel Ann Arbor: Ardis.
Barnes J (1984) Flaubert’s Parrot. London: Jonathan Cape.
Barthes R (1977) [1967] The Death of the Author in Heath, Stephen (ed & trans.). Image-Music-Text. London: Fontana, 142–148.
Davies GH (2010) Six things you must do in Canterbury. Mail on Sunday.
Dickens C (2015) [1854] Hard Times. New York: Open Road Media.
Derrida J (2016) [1967] Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Dolby G (1912) [1885] Charles Dickens As I Knew Him: the Story of the Reading Tours in Great Britain and America, 1866–1870. New York: Scribner’s Sons.
Flanders J (2007) Great Forebodings about Dickens World. Guardian.
Foucault M (1991) [1969] What is an Author? in P Rabinow (ed) The Foucault Reader. Harmonsworth: Penguin, pp. 101–120.
John J (2008) “People muht be amuthed”? Reflections on Chatham’s “Dickens World”. The Dickensian, 104: 5–21.
Hart C (2007) What, the Dickens World? Times Online.
Hughes K (2010) Dickens World and Dickens’s World. Journal of Victorian Culture, 15(3): 388–393.
Lydall R (2005) Forget Disneyland, try Dickens World. Evening Standard.
Lyotard J-F (1984) [1979] The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Morgan ML (2019) Levinas on god and the trace of the other in Morgan. In: Michael L (ed) Oxford Handbook of Levinas. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Rawlings N (2012) Top 10 Weirdest Theme Parks. Time.
Walton KL (1990) *Mimesis as Make-Believe: on the Foundations of the Representational Arts*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Watson NJ (2006) *The Literary Tourist: Readers and Places in Romantic and Victorian Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Watson NJ (2020) *The Author’s Effects: On Writer’s House Museums*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.