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Performing Femininity

Storytelling and gender

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The literary pilgrimage: from Brontëites to TwiHards

When I first travelled overseas as a student, I visited Paris’s Pére Lachaise cemetery, resting place of Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, and Jim Morrison. Wilde’s tomb was covered in red lipstick kisses — now thwarted after the installation of a glass barrier in 2011 — and a young goth man sat at its base reading a book of poetry.

The desire to connect with literary places, from authors' birthplaces, homes, and graves, to sites of
fictional inspiration, supports a substantial tourist trade. The reasons why people embark on literary pilgrimages are as diverse as the kinds of fiction that inspire them.

In a study of why tourists visited the ruins of Tintagel Castle in Cornwall — a site associated with Arthurian legend—Benjamin Earl found that many visitors sought to “maintain their cultural distinction and assert their cultural capital”.

In other words, travel to the historical site made tourists feel unique in comparison with people who only consume stories and images relating to the myth through readily-accessible popular culture.

Visiting Charles Dickens’ London home or Haworth and the Brontë parsonage similarly demonstrates the traveller’s literary knowledge and taste.

The homes of celebrity authors also foster a degree of connection to them. The normally private realm of the venerated author is opened up in these literary museums, allowing the viewer to situate themselves in the exact position as Dickens, looking at the very same desk at which he wrote Oliver Twist.

In the past week, annual Bloomsday celebrations took place in Dublin and around the world. June 16 has become an opportunity for the sturdy readers who appreciate James Joyce’s Ulysses to recreate the day in the life of protagonist Leopold Bloom that the novel depicts.

It might begin with a liver and kidney breakfast and continue with a walking tour that follows Bloom’s path from Middle Abbey Street to the National Library.

For most of his life, Joyce lived outside Dublin. Yet, as with Bloomsday, much popular literary tourism is fixated on visiting the real inspirations for the settings inhabited by fictional characters.

Detective Sherlock Holmes, for example, has inspired a plethora of tourist attractions in London. A number of these attempt to bring imagined places, such as the famous 221b Baker St, which operates as a museum, into being.
The difficulty of assembling a museum for a fictional character for which no historical artefacts exist is evident in the often scathing TripAdvisor reviews. While the Sherlock Holmes pub in Charing Cross, which some fans appreciate as at least having been referenced in one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s stories, includes a “recreation of Holmes and Watson’s study and sitting room”.

Tours of locations that inspired novels, including Sherlock Holmes, are increasingly becoming a way for readers to express their fandom for a particular book or series.

There is a long history of fans of LM Montgomery visiting Prince Edward Island, Canada in order to see the homes and landscapes that inspired Anne of Green Gables. Anne is the most prominent feature on the island’s tourist website, which notes that hundreds of thousands of tourists visit “her island” each year.

Twilight fans who descend on the small town of Forks, Washington, nevertheless, won’t find traces of author Stephenie Meyer, who resides in Arizona, or sparkly vampires during their visit.

The rainy former logging town nevertheless serves, as Tanya Erzen suggests, as “a prism for fans’ collective fantasy that they might momentarily live in the marvellous world of the books”.

Each September “Twihards” gather in Forks on the date of protagonist Bella’s birthday for a full weekend of activities as part of the Forever Twilight celebration.

Similarly, in the past decade, numerous Da Vinci Code tours of the Louvre and Europe and the UK have mapped the fictional ideas and theories of Dan Brown on to important cultural and historical destinations.

In the cases of these supernatural, or at least fanciful, novels, there is a desire to find an element of that fantasy in reality. Harry Potter tours, for instance, regularly visit the medieval village of Lacock, which is described as having inspired the town of Godric's Hollow in J K Rowling’s series.

Modern technology enables us to feel connected with an imagined group or community of people who read or view the same stories as we do. As Roger Craig Aden shows in Popular Stories and Promised
Lands: Fan Cultures and Symbolic Pilgrimages, the journey to a sacred destination — whether a football game or the Green Gables house — sharpens that sense of a bond with like-minded individuals.

This desire to seek out a heightened feeling of belonging to a literary community transcends age, class, and taste distinctions.