Maier, Sarah E., et al., editors. *Neo-Victorian Things: Re-Imagining Nineteenth-Century Material Cultures in Literature and Film*. **Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 233 pp. ISBN 978-3-031-06203-2**

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In *Neo-Victorian Things*, editors Sarah E. Maier, Brenda Ayres, and Daniella Mariann Dove compile a comprehensive collection of essays, each of which discussing the role of material objects in neo-Victorian narratives. Dove and Maier centre upon the concept of *thingness*—a term they use to describe material objects in these narratives—suggesting that these objects do not merely represent the Victorian past but actively *animate* it, creating "a visceral, tactile and/or emotional" (2) experience for the modern reader. The volume's theoretical framework is strongly grounded in Bill Brown's *Thing Theory*,[1] which frames *things* as agents that actively shape the relationship between *humans* and *things*. This perspective in literary criticism is further enriched by newer approaches in object-oriented ontology, new materialism, phenomenology, and sensory studies. The Introduction lays out a well-rounded structure for the volume, unpacking the key terms of materialism and neo-Victorianism. It then offers an overview of how each chapter explores the complex relationship between *things* and humans across various neo-Victorian adaptations—be it literature or film. In chapter 2, Rosario Arias focuses on Deborah Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (2015). Arias argues that Lutz's approach to Victorian materiality is about more than mere historical curiosity; instead, it positions artefacts (such as Charlotte Brontë's fern book) as dynamic entities that allow contemporary readers to form a sensory and emotional connection with the past. Arias' analysis of Lutz's work significantly contributes to neo-Victorianism in terms of reconstructing the daily lives of the Brontës. As Arias also highlights, Lutz's study provides a deeply phenomenological reading of Brontës' material world, focusing on the affective relationship between "objects and humans" (35).

Following this, Lewis Mondal expands the discussion in chapter 3 by situating Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990) as a neo-slave narrative that reinterprets Victorian objects—particularly the ship—as a mediator between identity and historical memory. Mondal shows how the ship's materiality, its function as both a tool of economic exchange and a site of racial violence, complicates traditional readings of

1 Arias highlights that *Thing Theory*, as proposed by Bill Brown, suggests that objects are considered to be *things* "when they stop working for us" (qtd. in Arias 25) or disrupt our usual interactions with them, thereby transcending their mere "utilitarian" (25) function. This shift demonstrates the relationship between human subjects and objects, where *things* take on a new, almost subject-like significance, revealing the complex ways in which we use and relate to material objects beyond simple commodity exchange.

the neo-Victorian. Mondal's chapter challenges us to rethink the boundaries of neo-Victorian studies beyond the British perspective, thereby expanding the scope of neo-Victorian studies across the continents. In chapter 4, Nadine Boehm Schnitker takes a similar postcolonial approach in her analysis of opium paraphernalia, as explored through her reading of Arthur Conan Doyle's short story *The Man with the Twisted Lip* (1891), its Granada TV adaptation (1986), and Amitav Ghosh's historical fiction, *Sea of Poppies* (2008). She examines how opium, as a material substance, coincides with various socio-political discourses (e.g., colonialism, class, and race) within the framework of Victorian and neo-Victorian materiality. By foregrounding the agency of *things*, Boehm-Schnitker emphasizes their symbolic performative roles in shaping identity and power relations, deepening the critical understanding of how material culture intersects with identity politics.

From the postcolonial perspective, another highlight of the volume is the analysis of piano as a *thing* that has dynamic roles in postcolonial and neo-Victorian narratives. In chapter 5, Dany van Dam discusses the symbolic importance of the piano and how it functions in a way as an extension of its owner's body, voice, and even colonial power in Jane Campion's film *The Piano* (1993) and Daniel Mason's novel *The Piano Tuner* (2002). As such, van Dam expands the discourse on materiality, Brown's *Thing Theory*, postcolonialism and its gendered dimensions[2] by investigating the ways in which the piano functions as a mediator of identity, power, and cultural displacement. Moving onto chapter 6, Daniella Mariann Dove presents an intriguing analysis of haunted materiality in Colm Tóibín's *The Master* (2004). Drawing on new materialist theories, particularly those of Jane Bennett (2010)[3] and Diana Coole (2010),[4] Dove discusses how the dress acts as an active, haunting agent in the fictional life of Henry James, recalling and reanimating the past. Her careful reading of *The Master* through the lens of haunted materiality offers significant insights into how *things* function as agents of memory and emotion in neo-Victorian historical fiction.

Maintaining the theme of haunted materiality, Brenda Ayres discusses "the *thingness* of a haunted house" (138) in chapter 7, focusing on Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), its screenplay adaptation *The Innocents* (1961), and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). While she draws on a range of critical perspectives, including those of Stephen King,[5] she argues that the haunted space is not

2 Van Dam's analysis is particularly strong in its attention to the gendered dimensions of piano playing in both texts. She draws on the work of feminist scholars such as Christine Knight and Mary Burgan to argue that the piano is not only a symbol of class and race but also a distinctly gendered object. In *The Piano*, Ada's relationship to the piano is explicitly gendered, as the instrument becomes a site of both her sexual expression and her resistance to male domination. Similarly, *The Piano Tuner*, "initially associates piano playing with middle-class femininity" (94), but as the piano is transported into the colonial setting, its *thingness* takes on more masculine connotations, representing the British Empire's cultural and political power.

3 See Janet Bennet's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke UP, 2010).

4 See *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics,* edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Duke UP, 2010).

5 Ayres references Stephen King's assertion that haunted houses are "the 'archetype of the Bad Place'" (qtd. in Ayres 134), in which these spaces are frequently haunted not just by spirits, but by the weight of their historical and material presence.

simply a backdrop for the psychological and emotional turmoil of the characters, but rather it is "a *thing* [that] has an agenda and agency of its own" (151), characterised by the emotions that the characters project onto the house. While Ayres' analysis is quite compelling, her argument might be expanded to include a discussion of how such haunted materiality interacts with other neo-Victorian works that focus on mental institutions, where perceiving the distinction between the animate and inanimate becomes increasingly blurred.

In chapter 8, Claire Nally takes a different approach and examines the materiality of crime through the notorious case of Mary Ann Cotton (1872). To do this, Nally focuses on the teapot associated with Cotton's alleged arsenic poisoning of her family, which was also featured in the TV series *Dark Angel* (2016). She argues that this seemingly mundane object, the teapot, in a way becomes an extension of Cotton's body, imbued with murderous agency. Nally's analysis offers a great perspective on the intersections between gender, objects, and crime narratives, while also advancing the discussions on the role of materiality in shaping historical narratives in neo-Victorian media. Chapter 9 shifts the focus to the material world of Sherlock Holmes and its contemporary adaptations in various types of media. Sarah E. Maier calls attention to Holmes' way of "forensic tracking of things" (183), which is a reflection of Holmes' scientific mind. Holmes often portrayed as "a calculating machine" (qtd. in Maier 184) by Watson, deeply entrenched in the material world, but estranged from human relations because his brilliance is inextricably tied to his detachment from emotional and social concerns. Maier analyses how Holmes' own identity is constructed and defined through his relationship with *things*. In addition to all these, the final chapter by Brenda Ayres brings the volume full circle by discussing the material and metaphysical connections between "things" and Victorian magic in neo-Victorian narratives. Ayres illustrates how conjuring items not only manipulates material reality, but also interrogates philosophical questions surrounding identity, objecthood, and agency, situating Victorian magic within historical contexts and modern cinematic interpretations, such as *The Prestige* (2006).

Neo-Victorian Things offers a critical and contemporary approach to understanding how *things* function within neo-Victorian narratives. Across the volume, each chapter illustrates how the *thingness* of these objects in neo-Victorian literature and media are not merely passive remnants of the Victorian past; instead, they serve as dynamic agents of memory, linking the Victorian past and present through material culture. Whether through fern books, teapots, pianos, haunted dresses/houses or opium paraphernalia, these *things* take on lives of their own, shaping both modern identity and culture. The diversity of media explored—ranging from novels and short stories to screenplays, TV series, and films—ensures that the volume's insights are relevant across a variety of contemporary cultural forms/mediums. In conclusion, I do consider *Neo-Victorian Things* as a valuable contribution to neo-Victorian scholarship by widening the boundaries of how we think about Victorian materiality. Yet, it could push these boundaries even further by including the discussion of the role of mental institutions (or asylums), money, gold, and archaeological artefacts in neo-Victorian narratives. Evidently, the volume provides a solid foundation for future studies on the relationship between materiality and neo-Victorianism, inviting readers to reconsider how *things* not only present the past but actively shape our understanding of it.