“Great Powers yet Unsuspected in Them”: The Insurrection of Things in Victorian Fiction

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English
University of Toronto

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how Victorian concepts of subject formation resulted in the concomitant creation of “things” as a separate entity from objects: entities that, unlike objects, with their socially-encoded transparency, exhibit a radical alterity that resists systems of containment and cognition. A pervasive cultural fear of insurrectionary things is evident in the era’s most popular literary form, the novel—a genre closely tied to its notions of identity construction. Characters’ unease around ostensibly inert objects arises from the culture’s fantasy of a material world populated with matter that can be acquired, arranged, and manipulated to maintain “traces” of its owner. But if personality can inflict itself upon objects, what prevents objects from permeating personality? Historically contextualizing my close readings with guidebooks, magazines, travelogues, and home décor manuals, in this project I demonstrate that the era’s discourse of thinghood arises from an ontologically imperialistic and intensely fragile concept of a “territorialized” identity, both personal and national.

My introduction describes the cultural conditions under which Victorian human-object relations developed and explains how the novel both established and problematized the fusion of person and thing. My first chapter examines Dickens’s brief hope that the newly formed Detective Police could sort out the ontological chaos of London, shedding light on the peculiar
activities of Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*. The next two chapters focus on the domestic interior as the problematic seat of Victorian identity: Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-paper” use conventionally gothic motifs to expose how home design restrained women’s ability to construct autonomous selves, while Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* and Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* display queer forms of identity formation based on a permeable relationality with the world. The final chapter examines depictions of African statues, both factual and fictional, to uncover a late-imperial “rhetoric of thinghood” used to mark and reject objects whose social histories conflict with Eurocentric ideas of human development. This dissertation relies on “thing theory” throughout to unpack the psychological and phenomenological triggers underpinning the era’s oppositional human-object interactions, which infused “things” with much of their assertive metaphysical presence.
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This project is dedicated to my incredible daughter, Cordelia Jane. Wherever this PhD leads our family, I hope most of all that it inspires you to courageously forge your own path through life.
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Introduction

"My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other of us has to go."
—Oscar Wilde

In her influential 1950 essay, “The Dickens World: A View from Todgers’s,” Dorothy Van Ghent analyzes the frequent interchanges between human subjects and inanimate objects in the author’s works, arguing that these “metabolic conversions” reveal the loss of a character’s agency. Dickens’s tendency to attribute subjectivity to objects (and object-like qualities to characters), which had long been dismissed by both contemporaries and modern critics as an unfortunate authorial predilection for the grotesque, was, according to Van Ghent, intended to exaggerate the forms of de-humanization people experienced in contemporary life. Characters who “treated their fellows as if they were things, themselves developed thing-like attributes” (420), thus implying that their inhumanity had physiological consequences. Equally, the animation of commodities suggests “an aggressiveness” borrowed from the human world, which had likewise “got out of control” (419), as in Pip’s description of his bed “squeezing [a] wretched little washing-stand in quite a Divinely Righteous manner” (Dickens Great Expectations 366).

The frequent merging of subject and object that Van Ghent detects in Dickens’s oeuvre was not unique in the history of English novels. Before Dickens and the Victorian era, however, such moments were meant to be consolatory. As Lynn Festa argues in Sentimental Figures of Empire, in eighteenth-century novels the “intersubjectivity” of owner and possessions often provided a sense of reassurance about the distinctiveness of identity in a world where commerce threatened to “dissolve the borders between discrete individuals” (Festa 76). In sentimental

1 According to Richard Ellman, Wilde uttered these words to Claire de Pratz shortly before his death (546).
literature, a particular object—such as a beloved’s handkerchief—can function as a proxy for its owner, and as a result, the two entities were frequently represented as being inalienably bonded together: the singularity of one’s being, in other words, was upheld though the “particularity of its possessions.” Similarly, the century’s “it-narratives” or “tales of circulation,” in which manufactured objects narrate their social histories as if they are living people, provided a “human face” to “abstract forces … that execute policies and actions in an emerging global system” (6). Deirdre Lynch, meanwhile, argues that a character’s ability to be “easily moved, and powerfully affected by surrounding objects” (347) vindicated the eighteenth century’s emerging consumer culture by providing new vehicles to express finer feelings and psychological refinements. As a result, personal property is often vital to characters’ wellbeing in novels by Henry Brooke, Laurence Sterne, Henry Mackenzie and Sarah Scott, but, as Lynch notes, “it is also the usual business of the sentimental novel to subordinate [objects] to [subjects].”

In contrast, Van Ghent’s essay identifies a paranoid attitude towards the object world, which I argue is evident not only in the work of Dickens, but also in Victorian novels more generally. Although the friendlier subject-object relations depicted in it-narratives and sentimental novels persisted into the nineteenth century, there also emerged a literary trope in which encounters between characters and seemingly willful manufactured items threaten to unseat that subject-object alliance. More specifically, narrative moments of characters’ unease around certain objects typically occur within an enclosed environment. In the novels I examine, that enclosure is most often (but not always) the interior of a private home. In The Moonstone, head servant Gabriel Betteredge declares that “our quiet English house” has been “suddenly invaded by a devilish Indian Diamond—bringing after it a conspiracy of living rogues” (33). The aesthete Des Esseintes in À rebours is disturbed at “no longer being absolute master in his own
house” (65) when his collection of religious art begins to arouse his dormant spirituality. Upon his encounter with a colossal statue of a skeleton inside a cave in remote Africa, the treasure hunter Allan Quatermain is so unnerved by its “hollow eye-places … fixed … upon [him]” (Haggard King Solomon’s Mines 166) that he nearly abandons his imperial adventures altogether. In each case, the object threatens to wrench control of a demarcated space away from the humans who ostensibly “own” it.

By performing an extensive analysis of various permutations of this frequently repeated scene of “object-insurrection” in Victorian novels, my dissertation discovers the contours of a culturally specific idea of how subjects construct and territorially “claim” an identity for themselves through possession. For the propertied classes especially, the interior self was frequently likened to the interior of one’s private home: a protected, bordered zone to be “filled” with whatever the individual wished to incorporate into their self-image. In the words of Elaine Freedgood:

> Like the fictitious but still convincing “blank” spaces on the map of empire, the idea of empty space invites the exercise of habitation as a demonstration of power. The disposition of things in space is also a way of externalizing an internal arrangement of objects and of enacting, however unconsciously, a strict control over them. (Ideas 33)

The object-filled interior thus becomes “both a model and a projection of self-fashioning” (Stewart 157), creating the idea of identity via collection. The importance of “having” to “being” was so pronounced in the nineteenth century that philosopher and psychologist William James acknowledged that “between what a man calls me and what he simply calls mine the line is difficult to draw” (291).

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2 Quoted from Margaret Mauldon’s translation of À rebours for Oxford. Huysmans’s original line: “ne plus être maître absolu chez lui” (ch. 7).
3 As I describe in more detail below, within the imperial context of Haggard’s novel, the British Empire’s ownership of the diamond mines—within which the statue is situated—is a foregone conclusion due to the protagonists’ possession of a map of Kukuanaland.
The era’s materialist ethos made such distinctions even harder. As Catherine Gallagher notes:

Although the literature of the early nineteenth century is replete with complaints against materialism for having rendered the universe mechanically nonvital, the opposite might just as well have been asserted: that materialism dramatically expanded the zones of the organic, vastly multiplied the entities that could be described as alive or dead, and reduced the sphere of things to which those categories would simply not apply. Materialist explanations of the nature of vitality, for example, are noticeably flexible about its location; “life” can lurk in numerous, previously unexpected places; in electricity, in magnetic “force,” in a subtly all-pervading liquid; indeed, it can be latent in the whole inorganic, or inanimate matter, which, with the development of organic chemistry, could be conceived as a vast storehouse for the building blocks of the organic. (190)

The expanded possibilities that Gallagher detects in the nineteenth century’s ideas of what could be considered “alive” also extended to what could be conceived of as possessing sentience. As Benjamin Morgan notes, within the age’s scientific epistemologies it was possible to regard the seemingly inanimate stuff of the world as bearing the qualities of consciousness:

That consciousness was the outcome of nervous activity was not in itself a new insight; the more precise formulation would be that “mind” was no longer seen as a bounded, static entity but as a dynamic process of interaction between the physiological system of the human body and its environment. (135)

But if the line between conscious self and its non-living surroundings was increasingly difficult to draw then who, or what, was in control? Notions of individuation modelled on the relations of dominance enjoyed by the “master of the house” provided a powerful sense of reassurance about the ascendancy of personal will. If the mind was “no longer seen as a bounded, static entity” but instead was “a dynamic process of interaction between the physiological system of the human body and its environment” (135), then actively delineating and fortifying the area of that “interaction,” imaginatively re-establishes the subject’s ascendancy.

In fact, many of the era’s assumptions about how individuals guaranteed ascendancy over their **milieu** were inspired by imperialism. As W. J. T. Mitchell, notes, the proscribed outlook that modern Western empires assumed with regards to its overseas territories was one of
“objectivism”: “the fantasy of what Rousseau called the ‘sovereign subject,’ a picture of the beholder as imperial, imperious consciousness, capable of surveying and ordering the entire object world” (156; my emphasis). More to the point, the imperial model allowed nineteenth-century Europeans to embrace biological notions of human psychology while suggesting that certain individuals, through imposing their will on the world, could rise above the entanglements of their milieu. French author Edmond Goncourt, otherwise a strong proponent of deterministic models of human behaviour, suggests that the “Occidental” homme du talent can escape the clutches of environmental influence:

[O]n soutenait que l'homme de l'Occident était une individualité plus entière, plus détachée, plus en relief sur la nature, moins mangée par l'ambiance des milieux, par cela même une individualité plus déteneuse d'une volonté propre que l'homme de l'Orient. (221)

[It has been argued that the man of the West was a more complete, more detached individual, a man stands in clearer relief from nature, less consumed by his surroundings—more to the point, an individuality more possessed of its own agency than the man of the East.] (My translation)

One method by means of which Western man could demonstrate his agency—his singularity of being that stood in “clearer relief” from its environment than the average human specimen—was by actively surveying that environment, ordering its contents (be they objects, people, or even geographies) and categorizing them into simpler, more legible nomenclatures. Strongly inspired by Linnaeus’s system of sorting the animal kingdom into ordered hierarchies, the Victorians’ desire to numerate and classify is evident in the massive catalogues of the British Museum to the Great Exhibition’s gradation of all production into four distinct categories. And as Judith Flanders notes, “the expectation was that such organization could (and should) be replicated at home” (81), with householders advised to take a yearly inventory of their possessions.

The increasing importance of attaining categorical mastery with respect to the entities in one’s lived environment had demonstrable effects on the English bildungsroman. Lynch argues
that in eighteenth-century novels, a protagonist becomes “stamped” with a unique identity in much the same way as a coin. In other words, character “was thought of as having been sent out from the Mint in order to be marked up by experience” (354). But in nineteenth-century novels, individuation becomes a much more calculated exercise. Freedgood posits that subjectivity in novels like *Jane Eyre* is portrayed as a “wasteland, a wilderness,” which must be purposefully cultivated “by a strict ‘hand’ reaching inside the self, ordering its contents, and closing its borders” (39). The idea of property as coterminous with its owner, previously seen most prominently in the English literary tradition with respect to gothic villains and their castles, becomes an increasingly ubiquitous means of portraying the self’s seigniorial relationship to its *milieu*.

Not surprisingly, models of personhood that stress a focused, deliberate management of a conceptual territory emerge alongside England’s development into the principal imperial power of the nineteenth century. The mercantile ideology of England as a nation of independent traders—a nation of vagrant Robinson Crusoes setting sail to find their fortunes—is upended in the nineteenth century due to the centralization of imperial power under the British Crown. As Marlow notes in *Heart of Darkness*, in his boyhood, the blank spaces on a map were “a delightful mystery—a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over” (8), but by the time of the events of the book, the standard map of the world’s landmasses was split into a checkerboard of colours (British pink, French blue, Dutch green) to mark the imperial powers’ overseas possessions. Whether decorating one’s home or subjugating colonized peoples to the tenets of English law, the motive was to establish the sovereignty of the possessing subject by way of ordering and classification. In other words, the British Empire’s relationship to the colonies is a macrocosm of Walter Benjamin’s description of the nineteenth-century bourgeois’ concept of the home: that it is first and foremost “a receptacle of the person” (*Arcades* 9). For decades, cultural
critics of the nineteenth century have subscribed to the notion of Victorians being preoccupied with protecting the ideological “inside” (the self, the home, the metropolis) from the corruptions of the “outside” (the Other, the public, the colonies). But it may be more accurate to consider the Victorian concept of “inside” as infinitely expandable: to argue that any space, no matter how sprawling or distant, could perceptually be *made* interior by enclosing it within borders and organizing its holdings. To put it another way, as Walter E. Houghton did nearly sixty years ago in *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, for many Victorians, “self-development … meant self-expansion” (291). This territorial, proprietary notion of constructing the self meant that all objects were potentially possessions: inert, passive extensions of their owner’s identity.

More to the point, technological leaps in cartography served to impose diagrammatic borders around imperial holdings. Thomas Richards explains how the “smooth and undifferentiated space of the old blank map” of an overseas colony “became the striated and specialized space peculiar to the discipline of geography” (14). In other words, through extensive imperial ordering activities—“geodetic triangulation, telegraph determination, route surveying, tacheometry, photography, and ferrotype reproduction”—remote and alien territories become conceptually “interiorized”: bounded, contained, and open to exploration.4

The British Empire’s attempts to codify its colonial spoils, therefore, cannot be separated from the culture’s attempts to interiorize its overseas holdings. Like the many empires that preceded it, nineteenth-century European imperial powers attempted to impose an “order of things” over their dominions.5 But as Richards argues, the British Empire’s ordering impulses were intensified by its unitary, comprehensive concept of knowledge—a “basic ordering code of life” (151)—that it believed could be obtained if it assembled a sufficiently comprehensive

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4 Richards asserts that geography, “unquestionably the queen of all imperial sciences in the nineteenth century, is especially inseparable from the domain of official and unofficial state knowledge” (13).

5 And, as Mitchell notes, empires also create criteria to deal with “bad” objects: “objects generally seen as worthless or disgusting from the imperial perspective, but which are understood to be of great and no doubt excessive value to the colonial Other” (158).
archive of the world. No matter what a given object’s history or purpose might be with respect to its culture of origin, it was systemically assimilated to a progressive narrative of the unfolding of civilization, with the British Empire positioned as that narrative’s logical endpoint (and therefore, genealogically speaking, the rightful possessor of all civilizations that preceded it). The empire’s many and varied institutions of classification were therefore tasked with the responsibility of reconstituting objects from the colonies (even potentially problematic ones, which in previous empires were typically destroyed) within strictly Western frameworks of reference and value.6

The satisfaction gained from ordering objects within an enclosed space comes through in a variety of European writings. The imperial propaganda surrounding the Great Exhibition, whose remarkable achievement was framed as the Englishman’s ability to reduce the “vast and varied … mass of objects” within the glass walls of Crystal Palace—a “shape in which it will permanently retain traces of the ordering hand” (Whewell 25)—is strikingly similar to Walter Benjamin’s descriptions of the pleasures of private collecting, a past-time that surged in popularity in the 1800s. Though he disparaged the capitalist hegemonies underlying nineteenth-century bourgeois home life, Benjamin evocatively—even erotically—celebrated the sovereign power of the private collector:

> It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired) it turns to stone. Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious becomes socle, frame, pedestal, seal of his possession. (*Arcades* 205).

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6 W. J. T. Mitchell argues that in pre-Enlightenment empires, threatening objects of the Other were typically treated as “idols”: “Ironically enough, this phase of imperialism corresponds to what economist Joseph Schumpeter calls an *objectless* disposition on the part of a state to unlimited forcible expansion” (my emphasis). A warrior culture plus an infinitely voracious and bloodthirsty deity who will tolerate no other gods before him and demand destruction of all idols is the formula for empire without limits, empire for the hell of it, a variation that Schumpeter traces from the Assyrians and Egyptians right down to Louis XIV” (160).
Unquestioned mastery over one’s possessions was both the basis of the Victorians’ dreams of subject-sovereignty, and the basis of its object-oriented nightmares. In Marx’s description of commodity fetishism, the trajectory of Benjamin’s prized item (which succumbs to petrification within its owner’s “magic circle”) is reversed. For Marx, a table, when it becomes commodified, “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas” (82). This famous passage from volume one of Capital is intended to dramatize the cognitive mysticisms that Marx argues result from the opacity of capitalist economics. In a capitalist system, Marx explains, because human beings are alienated from the products of their labour, value seems to adhere to the objects themselves rather than to the amount of labour expended to produce it, hence commodities’ unsettling sense of “aliveness.”

In relation to the focus of this dissertation, Marx’s acrobatic, cogitating table forces his nineteenth-century reader to not only contend with a newfound alterity arising out the conditions of commodity culture, but also to consider the possibility of that alterity manifesting itself within the home. The table—an essential piece of domestic furniture—suddenly displays a life of its own, and unlike the talkative pin-cushions and walking canes of the previous century’s “it” narratives (whose “character” typically builds up through a series of pawn-shop exchanges), this inhuman entity rises up from within the ostensibly homeostatic realm of “the private citizen’s universe” (Benjamin Charles Baudelaire 169).

As noted above, within the Victorians’ formula of territorial individuation, all objects have the potential to be “possessions”: the inert material onto which identity projects itself. Nineteenth-century novelists provoke their readers to grapple with the negative consequences of relying on the passivity of objects to manifest one’s identity. In many nineteenth-century narratives, an object that seems to oppose or resist possession—or even worse, that seems to manifest someone else’s subjectivity—transforms into a cuckoo, a Trojan horse, the imperial
standard of an invading force. The threatening spectre of furniture menacing vulnerable characters conjures up the idea of one’s possessions becoming, like a subjugated people, rebellious and unruly. These insurgent entities give form to the innate fragility of the Victorians’ notions of proprietary personhood, whose ascendency over its *milieu* was accessible to only the most privileged individuals—and even then that ascendency could only be maintained through constant, purposeful vigilance. More broadly, however, the idea of objects getting the upper hand and taking over a character’s zone of influence spoke directly to the period’s fears that human beings were indeed, in the words of Leo Spitzer, “victims of their environment, as that which conditions and modifies life becomes the enemy of the living individual” (180).

Not surprisingly, given that this formula of identity construction was so strongly influenced by imperial expansion, colonial spoils transported to England were a particular source of unease. Numerous critics have noted that the popularity of “mummy fictions” hinged on the spectre of “dead” objects (in this case the ancient Egyptian corpses brought to London’s museums) suddenly resurrecting, thereby “disturb[ing] the order of the present, and particularly the contemporary metropolis” (Warwick 130). But throughout the Victorian period, literary portrayals of even the most “English” of objects hint at their hidden “ingenious demon[s]” (Van Ghent 419), such as Joe Gargery’s top-hat, which, in spite of—or possibly because of—its owner’s excessive attentions, manages to slip off its moorings and “splas[h] … into the slop-basin” (Dickens *Great Expectations* 222).

Object-being has always been a tricky thing to parse when it comes to the culture’s most popular literary genre. The long catalogues of objects that fill the pages of Victorian novels have inspired many contemporary critics to interrogate *how* we are meant to read them: Roland Barthes influentially argued that objects that seem to have no symbolic value in the text are meant to signify the vagaries of the Real in general; their function is to make the bourgeois
worldview espoused by realist fiction seem “natural.” More recent scholarship has tried to unpack how the Victorians themselves responded to novelistic descriptions of the material world. Leah Price argues that novels’ sheer excess of detail required their consumers to learn to “skip and skim, to tune in and zone out” (Price 233). Freedgood argues the opposite: that the real-world histories of calico curtains and mahogany furniture, which seem exist on the peripheries of narrative, prove their literary representations had serious political implications—many of which are lost to contemporary readers.

Though I align my work with Freedgood’s more historically-attuned interpretations, my treatment is less focused on literary objects’ real-world histories. Rather, I argue that novelistic depictions of antagonistic objects are evidence of a radical shift in subject-object relations in the nineteenth century. Namely, the Victorian era gave perceptual birth to things: entities that, in the words of Bill Brown, seem to “lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects” (“Thing Theory” 5). While the modernist Douglas Mao believes a recognition of the “physical object as object—as not-self, as not-subject, as most helpless and will-less of entities, but also as fragment of Being, as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient opacity” is a “peculiarly twentieth-century malady or revelation” (4), this dissertation asserts that the Victorians had created the perfect conditions under which things could proliferate. Unlike modernism, however, which was able to construct “an admiration for the object world beyond the manipulations of consciousness” (11), many Victorians found it challenging to conceive of things as anything other than a threat to the unity and continuity of the self. Within the parameters of the period’s reigning ideas of identity construction, any sense of alterity that arose within the borders of one’s domain (be it on an individual or national scale) had an air of sedition about it.
As I describe in further detail below, in order to protect themselves against the destabilizing aura of things, many Victorians constructed discourses that enforced a strict dichotomy between subject and object. Some of these proscriptions attempted to manage the portrayals of ontological “blending” in literature itself (such as with Ruskin’s writings on the pathetic fallacy). But others moved far beyond the scope of the literary, particularly with respect to the new discipline of anthropology, which denounced any belief system that permitted more fluid configurations between the human and nonhuman as primitive and alien.

The Victorian novel problematizes these distinctions. In fact, its convention of delineating character “metonymically by the prescribed materiality of its circumstantial reality” (Kearns 180) ensures that the boundaries of subjectivity are often difficult to extricate from that materiality. And in spite of Ruskin’s pronouncements against their use, the novels examined in this project frequently muddy the ontological waters with literary devices such as personification, metonymy, and ekphrasis, which leave ambiguous which entity is the presiding influence. The aristocratic Squire Talboys’s “square, pale face,” like a “sharp, uncompromising, hard-headed terrier” (Braddon 205) is echoed in his “square-built, northern-front, shelterless house” (204) in Lady Audley’s Secret. But given that the house and grounds are ancestral property, it is impossible to determine whether Talboys’s character is the result of growing up in such an environment, or whether the environment itself has been modified to reflect its owner’s stern, unyielding personality.

Encounters with things, on the other hand, often trigger a character’s sudden re-orientation of their understandings of the self’s relationship to the world. In The Time Machine, for instance, the Time Traveller’s interactions with the White Sphinx trigger a xenophobic repulsion to the future world that unsettles his former pose of self-assured objectivity. Heidegger has referred to this unexpected access to previously indiscernible vantage points on the world as
*augenblick*, or a “moment of vision”—the experience of which can trigger “the sudden and free emergence of a new order of entities, or origins, and abrupt beginnings” (Ó Murchadha 158).

These frequent and narratively conspicuous moments of epistemological destabilization belie the inclination of late twentieth-century criticism to view the nineteenth-century novel as first and foremost a hegemonic tool to instil the “naturalness” of bourgeois subjectivity. And in fact, as the nineteenth century wore on, novels increasingly became a space of ontological experimentation, used particularly by authors interested in non-normative forms of identity to explore anti-dualistic accounts of mind and body, human and nonhuman, organic and inorganic.

**Reading Things in Novels**

Van Ghent’s insights about the “gruesome spiritual transformations” (420) between subjects and objects in Dickens’s oeuvre became the focus of Marxist-oriented literary criticism in the 1980s and 90s, which asserted that Victorians were in the midst of an emerging commodity culture that reduced subject-object relations to an antagonistic back-and-forth between the alienated subject and dematerialized object. Through the influence of theorists like Fredric Jameson, Jean Baudrillard, and members of the Frankfurt School, nineteenth-century novels were studied as literary products both created by and responding to the industrial revolution. The manufactured commodities portrayed in them were said to function, for instance, as market capitalism’s “representational agent(s)” (Lindner 1), alienating characters from authentic human relationships by replacing social exchanges with economic ones. The domestic interior was often the stage of these commodity-enabled alienations. In 1995’s *Novels behind Glass*, Andrew Miller describes the “vampiric process” (221) by which, for instance,

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7 Marxist scholars such as Terry Eagleton (*Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* [Macmillan, 1975]), Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Cornell UP, 1981]) and M. M. Bakhtin (*The Dialogic Imagination* [U of Texas P, 1981]) built their literary analyses from Louis Althusser’s notion of popular works like novels functioning as ideological apparatuses of the state (from his famous essay of the same name).

8 Lindner defines commodity culture as “*[a] culture organized around the production and exchange of material goods*” (3).
Middlemarch’s Rosamond Vincy becomes herself an “exquisite ornament to the drawing-room” (464), while her “departure from the animate world of the realistic novel” (Miller 221) ultimately signals her husband’s downfall.

The new millennium, however, inaugurated a dramatic shift in critical attention to literary objects as a result of Bill Brown’s “thing theory”: a methodology mapped out by him in his edited collection Things in 2002. Brown draws on Heidegger’s notion that the total reality of an object is forever withdrawn from us, and only certain aspects of it are illuminated at any moment in time. In addition, what we can interpret about an object is constantly in flux as a result of psychological, cultural, and phenomenological conditions. Objects—entities that have “a name, an identity, a gestalt, or a stereotypical template, a description, a use or function, a science” (Mitchell 156)—are therefore not as stable in their ontology as modern categories say they are. In fact, Brown’s theory emphasizes the innate fragility of those categories, as at any moment an object can break or become obsolete: that is, it can become a “thing,” forcing people to witness “the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, [being] arrested, however momentarily” (Brown “Thing Theory” 4).

Brown’s examples of things are mainly tools that have become non-functional in some way, forcing the observer to notice their obdurate Otherness. However, as subsequent critics adapting thing theory have demonstrated, an object’s innate “thinghood” can also become apparent when formerly forgotten or obscured aspects of its social history are brought to light. Critics who have used this method most successfully in Victorian literary contexts include Freedgood and Suzanne Daly, who have sought to re-evaluate the significance of novelistic details that have historically been dismissed as narratively irrelevant. In The Ideas in Things, Freedgood claims to leave behind traditional “allegorical” readings, focusing on the real-world history of the literal object rather than its symbolic resonance within a novel’s plot. She also
asserts that rather than being ignorant of a literary object’s real-world source of manufacture, as Marx asserts, the typical nineteenth-century reader may have been fascinated by its industrial entanglements. Daly as well, in her focus on novelistic portrayals of imported goods from India in *The Empire Inside*, reveals the complex histories of nineteenth-century commodities that are no longer readily accessible to present-day readers. But unlike Freedgood, Daly argues that novels deliberately *suppressed* those histories from contemporary readers by embedding them within a hegemonic construction of “everyday” existence. “English novelists,” she claims, “helped to domesticate and contain the *idea* of India by writing Indian imports into the novels as indispensable accoutrements of middle-class English life” (Daly 7).

Though they arrive at opposing conclusions about the nineteenth-century novel’s relationship to the real-world history of the objects depicted therein, both authors’ efforts to uncover the social histories of apparently inconsequential narrative details take inspiration from Brown’s comparison of thing theory to a filthy window. In his estimation, we habitually do not notice windows; we look through them “as we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us).” But when the window becomes filthy, we see the window itself: it becomes an “object[...] asserting itself as [a] thin[g]” (Brown “Thing Theory” 4). In other words, both authors “dirty” the literary objects in question, making them newly conspicuous to the contemporary reader. As a result, even Barthes’ strongest evidence for the existence of “insignificant notation” (Barthes 142) in realist novels—the barometer in Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart*—can become, when its real-world history and value are considered, an icon of the *zeitgeist* of the nineteenth century itself.9

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9 For Bill Brown, the barometer provides insights into Madame Aubain’s “primitive” (and very nineteenth-century) fetishism. The character “saturates her material world with significance, investing material objects ... with the power to make the absent (such as Mme. Aubain’s deceased daughter, [or] the Holy Ghost) quite palpably and exuberantly present” (*Material Unconscious* 17). But even more, the barometer exposes the genre’s capacity “to materialize (to signify indexically) an absent presence” (16). To push Brown’s point further, Mme. Aubain’s barometer is metonymic of the nineteenth century’s fixation with rendering even the most numinous aspects of the world into a visible materiality that can be measured, controlled, and rendered useful to human beings. Thus the barometer
However, as some critics have pointed out, in uncovering the real-world cultural significance of literary objects, this methodological approach is anthropological at its core. In the words of John Plotz, “[t]he logical objection to such work is that it generally hears the objects saying nothing that the ambient culture has not already instilled” (“Materiality” 110). These kinds of “object studies” neglect a fundamental component of thing theory, which is to give a name to the sensation of the “imponderable and slightly creepy what-is-it-ness” (“Can” 529) that arises from a failure to identify or classify.\textsuperscript{10} Given the frequency of narrative moments in which seemingly inert objects provoke an unsettled response in protagonists, I see little need to focus on literary things that are disguised as narratively inconsequential objects. Why not, to quote pioneer phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, go “back to the things themselves” (168)?

Thing theory is an effective tool for identifying such moments of estrangement, but to ascertain why they occur, I invoke other critical frameworks. In We Have Never Been Modern, for instance, Bruno Latour argues that anxiety over the ontology of things is built into the fabric of modern epistemology: by insisting upon purified forms—on strict boundaries between subject and object, for instance—the modern world unintentionally ensures that relational networks proliferate between them, creating more and more unstable, and therefore uncontrollable, pluralities of being. Though Latour and his adherents argue that the proliferation of hybrids has only now become so pervasive that we can no longer deny their existence, Victorian culture exhibits a remarkable compulsion to imagine into existence the anomalous, the hybrid, and the monstrous in spite of—even more likely, because of—the era’s zeal for system building.

\textsuperscript{10} Things can therefore “awaken a certain suspicion of doubt about the reliability of our own categories” (Mitchell 159). Things are discursively nimble: they can refer to a brute materiality that may eventually be organized into a system—“bring me that thing on the shelf.” Conversely, however, they can also refer to the not-yet-concrete, the amorphous and intangible: “There’s a thing about that poem that I’ll never get” (Brown “Thing Theory” 5). Things can refer to powerful forces that seem to exceed an entity’s mere materiality—the “magic by which objects become fetishes, idols, totems” (5)—or they can denote the abject or unwanted: “Get that thing out of here.”
In keeping with Latour’s notion of the epistemologically disruptive potential of hybrid entities, I argue that the rhetorical devices Victorian novels use to represent things undermine ontological dichotomies fundamental to modern thought: human and nonhuman, subject and object, dead and alive, nature and culture. Consider the example of “white Death” in *King Haggard’s Mines*, which the hero-explorer Allan Quatermain encounters upon entering Kukuanaland’s sacred caves:

> It was a ghastly sight. There at the end of the long stone table, holding in his skeleton fingers a great white spear, sat *Death* himself, shaped in the form of a colossal human skeleton, fifteen feet or more in height. High above his head he held a spear, as though in the act to strike; one bony hand rested on the stone table before him, in the position a man assumes on rising from his seat, whilst his frame was bent forward so that the vertebrae of the neck and the grinning gleaming skull projected towards us, and fixed its hollow eye-places upon us, the jaws a little open, as though it were about to speak. (166)

Quatermain shifts between the pronouns “it” and “he,” suggesting his uncertainty over whether to treat the statue as a subject or an object. The explorer identifies the figure as “Death himself,” collapsing the difference between the statue and the abstract, personified concept it represents. The description also raises questions about whether the statue acts or is acted upon—whether the statue has been passively positioned as “a man … rising from his seat” with his “frame … bent forward” or whether he is actively “fix[ing] his hollow eye-places upon us.” Such figurative exchanges and existential substitutions are part of the destabilizing process that I argue attends the era’s literary portrayals of things.

Thinghood in Victorian novels is also frequently signalled by *ekphrasis*: the detailed description of an object in words. Historically, ekphrasis was a rhetorical opportunity to bring a subject to vivid pictorial life. But similar to personification and metonymy, in nineteenth-century novels this literary device often serves to unsettle the hierarchy of subject over object. As Gabriel Betteredge notes in *The Moonstone*, for the Victorians it was “but common politeness” to “put the Person before the Thing” (21), and ekphrasis threatens to lavish undue attention on the latter.
Like the erotic object in Laura Mulvey’s theory of the cinematic male gaze, things “endang[er] the unity of the diegesis” (843) by arresting the viewer—and the narrative—with their spectacular existence. In *The Time Machine* for instance, the Traveller, upon arriving in the far future, spies the statue of a “winged sphinx” whose “sightless eyes seem to watch [him]” (19). He delivers an extensive description of its appearance before finally tearing his eyes away, losing his spatial and temporal bearings in the process: “I stood looking at it for a little space—half-a-minute, perhaps, or half-an-hour. It seemed to advance and to recede as the hail drove before it denser and thinner.”

Finally, thinghood is represented when characters find themselves unable epistemologically to account for an entity’s existence. In the quotation from *King Solomon’s Mines* above, Quatermain guesses that the statue has been carved out of one of the cave’s stalactites, but aesthetically the statue is unlike anything from the British Empire’s colonial holdings, so the explorer cannot determine its culture of origin. He can only surmise that its creation was “a freak of fancy on the part of some old-world sculptor” (167). He is also left grasping at straws with regards to its purpose, suggesting that the figure was intended to “frighten away any marauders.” Certainly that is the response it arouses in Quatermain, who admits that had he not been forcefully held in place, “I do honestly believe that in another five minutes I should have been outside that stalactite cave, and the promise of all the diamonds in Kimberley would not have induced me to enter it again” (165).

Characters’ feelings of apprehension, awakened by ostensibly animate objects, are not limited to novels that take place on the as-yet-unconquered expanses of the colonial frontier. Given the tendency of Victorians to clutter their parlours with so much *bric-à-brac* (a distinctly nineteenth-century term) that the home became “a sort of domestic museum for the exotic and antique” (N. Daly 33), the domestic realm was primed to provoke a feeling of *unheimlich* in its
occupants. Not surprisingly therefore, characters in novels set in domestic contexts frequently sense a looming malevolence from their surroundings. In “The Yellow Wall-paper” and “A House Full of Horrors” wallpapers “stare,” hallways “glare,” parlours “madden,” and dressing gowns “torture.” Like a gothic villain, a thing’s singularity of being seems to permeate the enclosed space, placing the protagonist in the role of the beset-upon heroine trapped in a castle: assaulted, mobbed, afflicted, sickened. In other words, things in novels threaten to dominate subjects: by taking control over a domain that should rightfully serve as an extension of human subjectivity, they threaten to “capture” the humans who reside within. Not surprisingly, characters often feel their autonomy threatened when circulating within interiors they do not control. After being exposed to the “strange excrescences” and “gross deviations” of the décor in the Brigstock family home in The Spoils of Poynton, Mrs. Gareth feels a “terrible chill,” wondering “if fate could really be plotting to saddle her with a daughter-in-law brought up in such a place” (4).

The possibility of losing control over one’s own destiny is essential to the subject-thing dynamic in Victorian novels. In contrast to Goncourt’s idea of the “Occidental” individual as standing in relief against the backdrop of his environment, the characters in the novels I analyze are frequently in danger of being absorbed by their enclosures—the fulfillment of which often signals a character’s loss of will. Henry James’s Portrait of a Lady follows Isabel Archer’s gradual transformation into one of her husband’s collected objets d’art, which precedes her literal imprisonment in his “house of suffocation” (395) in Rome. Seeing her for the first time two years after her marriage, Isabel’s cousin Ralph remarks upon the mask that “completely cover[s] her face”; a painted-on expression of “fixed and mechanical … serenity” (362) similar to the “beautiful blank faces” (279) of the antique marbles she once admired, and which her husband collects. In À rebours, meanwhile, the protagonist Des Esseintes fears becoming like his
aristocratic relatives, whose habits of obsolete ceremonial inside their grim ancestral mansions are so “impressed on the softening pulp inside [their] ancient skulls” that he compares them to “mummies entombed in their Pompadour catafalques behind rococo panelling” (Baldick 7). Much of the horror Quatermain expresses at the threshold of the “Place of the Dead,” where the statue of white Death is located, involves the realization that inside, the body of Chief Twala is “being transformed into a stalactite” (166): Twala is literally becoming part of the cave itself as a result of an accumulating film of dripping silicate.

The pervasive sense of doom that attends these characters’ absorption into their interiors speaks to an aspect of thing theory that is often disregarded by contemporary critics, but which was an all-too-present concern for the Victorians: the possibility of losing the privileges of subjecthood. As noted in above, the prospect of having one’s personal will thwarted by heredity, environment, or overwhelming institutional forces contributed to what George Augustus Sala described as his era’s preoccupation with “subdivision, classification, and elaboration” which became “distinguishing characteristics of the present era of civilization” (xxv). To triumph over the possibility of being themselves “fixed” within a certain place or fate, many Victorians imposed that fixity onto other entities. The more specialized and attenuated those classifications, the more iron-clad an individual’s control over their domain of influence.

However, the requirement of having a “territory” over which to enact subject sovereignty reveals the “pyramid scheme” that lies at the heart of this particular construction of Victorian subjecthood: the most self-realized individuals, the managerial elite at the “top,” not only attain their position through social, gender, and economic privilege, but they maintain their sovereign subjectivity by ordering the entities below them. Those positioned within the pyramid’s middle tiers—the vast majority of the population—struggle with what Isabel Armstrong calls the

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11 “… [l]empreinte dans la pulpe ramollie de ces vieux cranes” … “ces momies ensevelies dans leurs hypogées pompadour à boiseries et à rocailles” (Huysmans 6).
“difficulty” of selfhood after Kant and Hegel: “How there could be such a being that was both in the world and the subject of a world?” (90). Victorian novels are populated with human beings who exist on either side of this dichotomy: characters portrayed as possessing an autonomous, evolving interiority exist alongside so-called flat characters, whose “being” is deterministically fixed by their physiology, their habits, or even their name. Additionally there are the “subject[s] in difficulties” (91), characters who are a special focus of his project because they attempt to gain or maintain subject sovereignty by seeking an enclosure composed of objects—or people—they can order.

The insurrectionary energies that often attend novelistic portrayals of things, in contrast, creatively upend the fate of entities on the lowest tier of the pyramid: manufactured objects, the inert, obdurate matter that has been literally reconstituted in form to perpetuate subject-supremacy. Their revolt reveals the pyramid’s reliance on passive “objecthood” for its perpetuation, and without the objects’ acquiescence the entire structure of territorial, acquisitive individuation threatens to crumble.

In focusing on these literary representations of things, I’m interested in considering what they, and the Victorian model of subjecthood that created them, reveals about the broader metaphysical assumptions embedded in western European thought. In this I’m aligning my dissertation with a wider transdisciplinary convergence in academia towards questioning the regime of the human. Movements like object-oriented ontology, actor-network theory, animal studies, ecocriticism, posthumanism, queer theory, speculative realism, and critical ethnic studies share a conviction that the modern habit of “stratifying demarcations and taxonomies of being” (Muñoz 210) has limited the horizon of critical thought, and with it, the scope of our ethical considerations in ways that have proven to be exclusionary and destructive. To cultivate what Douglas Mao describes as an “extrasubjective integrity” (10), or what Latour calls the human
being as *anthropos*: the “weaver of morphisms” (137), requires, for many theorists, rejecting liberal humanist forms of subjectivity that still work from assumptions about the existence of a sovereign, Foucaultian “Man.” In other words, to begin to conceive of an alternative to our inherited notions of subjecthood, it is vital to scrutinize the culture in which much of the scaffolding of modernity’s continuing tendency to split the world into self-determining subjects and dominated objects was erected.¹²

Though inspired by some strains of thought from object-oriented ontology and other methodologies that seek to de-centre the human, this project does not speculate upon or attempt to understand the intangible “life” of objects depicted in the texts examined. Plotz is rightfully skeptical of the often “medievally hermetic” attempts of object-centred approaches that endeavour to comprehend non-human ontology outside of human modes of perception—a difficulty that becomes self-defeating when analyzing *textual representations* of said objects. The represented object has by definition been “reduc[ed], appropriate[ed], and misdescrib[ed]” (“Materiality” 527). Instead, this project considers how novelists created the *idea* of insurrectionary things in order to interrogate—and in some cases push back against—scientific epistemologies such as anthropology, sociology, and economics, as well as hegemonic discourses like the cult of domesticity and imperial propaganda, all of which asserted and entrenched the modern subject-object dichotomy. In contrast to historical critiques of Victorian novels as being monolithically “complicit in the construction and perpetuation of ideologies” (Jaffe “Modern” 433), my dissertation proves that many were part of a subversive representative tradition that subtly questioned what Leo Bersani calls “the literary myth of the rigidly ordered self” (16).

The Emergence of the Interior

In *A Study in Scarlet*, the novella that marks the first appearance of Sherlock Holmes, the detective explains to his bemused acquaintance Dr. Watson why he chooses to remain ignorant of domains he sees as irrelevant to his work, such as literature, politics, or even the fact that the earth orbits the sun:

I consider that a man's brain originally is like a little empty attic, and you have to stock it with such furniture as you choose. A fool takes in all the lumber of every sort that he comes across, so that the knowledge which might be useful to him gets crowded out, or at best is jumbled up with a lot of other things so that he has a difficulty in laying his hands upon it. Now the skilful workman is very careful indeed as to what he takes into his brain-attic. He will have nothing but the tools which may help him in doing his work, but of these he has a large assortment, and all in the most perfect order. (Conan Doyle 15)

As Athena Vrettos remarks in her analysis of Victorian psychology, Holmes’s explanation encapsulates wider Victorian assumptions about the processes of the mind, particularly how “individuals can control, or even construct, the self” (67). Holmes likens the organization of the mind to architectural space, with knowledge brought in and arranged within the interior of his “brain-attic.” Furthermore, the detective compares the act of constructing the self to the capacity to manage material resources: to acquire and arrange pertinent “furniture” and to discard useless, unformed “lumber.”

Holmes’s confidence in his ability to order his mind as easily as he would his own living quarters is a consequence of what Michel Foucault describes as an epistemic shift that occurred in the West after the Enlightenment. Before the modern era, in what Foucault refers to as the “Classical” period, human beings could be said to clarify the order of the world, but not to create

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13 Although in *Study in Scarlet*, Doyle compares the scrupulous neatness of Holmes’s living habits to his clarity of mind, he later portrays the detective as hopelessly slovenly. Watson later complains that “although in his methods of thought he was the neatest and most methodical of mankind … he was none the less the less in his personal habits the most untidy men that ever drove a fellow lodger to distraction.” He perilously mixes home and work so that their “chambers were always full of chemicals” and “criminal relics had a way of wandering [into] the butter-dish” (354). Doyle interrogates Victorian notions of owner-possession affinity: either Holmes’s chaotic surroundings reflect the unconventional genius of Holmes’s mind, or there is no homological link between Holmes’s psyche and his living space whatsoever.
God was the transcendental source of signification, and human beings were thus a part of nature. But following the modern paradigm shift, humanity is no longer just one iteration of divine creation (albeit a favoured one), but becomes “a subject among objects” (Order 28). In other words, “Man,” now conceived of as the transcendental source of all representation, not only perceives the order of the world, but moulds it in his image: “thus Man emerges not merely as both subject and object of knowledge, but even more paradoxically, as organizer of the spectacle in which he appears” (29).

But this concept of “Man” that “grants primacy to the self’s perception and to its freedom” (Armstrong Glassworlds 90) is simultaneously subverted by the fact that human beings are also “subject” to physiological and environmental processes. Foucault elaborates:

The modern themes of an individual who lives, speaks and works in accordance with the laws of an economics, a philology, and a biology, but who also, by a sort of internal torsion and overlapping, has acquired the right, through the interplay of those very laws, to know them and to subject them to total clarification—all these themes so familiar to us today and linked to the existence of the “human sciences” are excluded by Classical thought. (Order 310)

Research into Victorian psychological texts bears out Foucault’s thesis: as Sally Shuttleworth notes in Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology, emerging materialist sciences of the self, which attributed human behaviour to neurological processes and inherited structures, resulted in conflicting psychological models in the nineteenth century, with one emphasizing the individual as “a powerless material organism, caught within the operations of a wider field of force,” and the other portraying the individual as “an autonomous unit with powers of self-control” (28).

As discussed previously, in order to demonstrate their separation from the world, many Victorians sought to manipulate it. Out of this process comes the creation of the notion of

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14 Foucault dates the “Classical” episteme as running from the late seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century.
15 Dreyfus and Rabinow: “Foucault offers us no reasons for this major change. He merely charts the changes which occurred, refusing the traditional gambit of history or the social sciences” (27).
16 Romantic-era literature such as Goethe’s Faust (1806) and Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818) speak to this sense of humanity’s new and frightening power over the material world.
“objecthood” as an ontological state. As Franco Moretti argues, what makes *Robinson Crusoe* one of the first definitively “modern” texts in English is that it creates a universe in which “no object is an end in itself … but [is] always and only *a means to do something else*” (36). The idea of objecthood allowed individuals to presume they could still possess personal autonomy in what was understood as an ostensibly materialist universe: if “human consciousness is not immaterial and disembodied but is physically rooted in the brain, nerves, and ganglia of the human body” (Morgan 135), then those physical structures could be consciously manipulated. Thus the paradox of modern subjectivity”—in which individuals, as both “free subject[s] in the world and … bound subject[s] of the world” (Armstrong 91)—could potentially triumph over their own materiality. If selfhood was the result of physiological processes, that is, through “a sort of internal torsion and overlapping,” those processes could conceivably be fashioned according to the subject’s desires. Indeed, at the same cultural moment when determinist concepts of the mind were taking hold, “self-help” arose as a favourite Victorian virtue. While biological models of selfhood suggested to some intellectuals the need for more systemic forms of social support to ensure the development of “healthy” minds, “[r]elying on yourself was preferred morally—and economically—to depending on others” (Briggs “Samuel Smiles” 103) because it provided the opportunity to demonstrate one’s “individual industry, energy, and uprightness.” “[W]here men are subjected to over-guidance and over-government,” Samuel Smiles, the popularizer of the term “self-help” warned, “the inevitable tendency is to render them comparatively helpless” (1).

The period’s focus on cultivating individual autonomy was frequently considered a distinct characteristic of the English. Although Matthew Arnold often denounced his fellow countrymen as barbarians and philistines, he also lauded “the impulse of the English race towards moral

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17 Based on Michael Fried’s classic essay “Art and Objecthood” (1967), W. J. T. Mitchell argues that “objecthood” is not a general, neutral category, but rather an imperialist viewpoint that assumes a position of dominance over the material world, in which entities “of all sorts” are treated as inert, compliant matter that can be “catalogued, preserved, and arranged in rational order” (148-49).
development and self-conquest” (42). Arnold’s telling choice of words is also indicative of the Victorian tendency to conflate individuation with domination.

Although theorists like John Lukacs have broadly argued that “the interior furniture of houses appeared together with the interior furniture of minds” (623), historical evidence suggests that the homology of person and home was a uniquely nineteenth-century notion, spurred on by a number of specific cultural factors.\textsuperscript{18} As Deborah Cohen notes, the growing centrality of domestic life gelled surprisingly well with the evangelical revival of the late eighteenth century. In reaction to the social upheavals caused by industrialism and urbanization, evangelicalism held that “human nature itself required reforming” (5) and concerned patriarchs turned to the home as a means shielding their families “from the perversions of the world” (6). Inside the spare interiors of early nineteenth-century homes, evangelicals cultivated a habit of self-assessment. Cohen writes that “practitioners of vital religion demanded of themselves a relentless self-scrutiny, a spiritual record keeping that has left to posterity tens of thousands of closely written diaries.” That scrupulous enumeration of worthiness extended to their domestic interiors. Because evangelicals “sought to live in a fashion that accorded with their spiritual quest” (7), their possessions were also newly scrutinized for signs of moral failing.

The idea of the home as a window to an individual’s soul eventually gained widespread cultural currency. By mid-century, as the religious fervour of the earlier decades waned, people’s expectations for their home-lives had radically changed. Rising incomes (Cohen notes that average income per head “doubled between 1851 and 1901” [13]), the dramatic increase in and

\textsuperscript{18} “The word ‘interior’ has undergone several shifts in meaning. It had come into use in English from the late fifteenth century to mean basic divisions between inside and outside, and to describe the spiritual and inner nature of the soul. From the early eighteenth century, interiority was used to designate inner character and a sense of individual subjectivity, and from the middle of the eighteenth century the interior came to designate the domestic affairs of a state, as well as the interior sense of territory that belongs to a country or region. It was only from the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, that the interior came to designate what the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records as: ‘The inside of a building or room, esp. in reference to the artistic effect; also, a picture or representation of the inside of a building or room. Also, in a theatre, a “set” consisting of the inside of a building or room’” (Rice Emergence 276).
affordability of commodities, and advances in sanitation and hygiene ensured that energy previously spent on obtaining the fundamentals of life (food, heat and light) could be focused elsewhere. Still inspired by the evangelical connection between interior life and exterior living, the Victorian idea of “home” was no longer simply architectural, but encompassed the marking of an architectural “shell” with objects and décor reflecting the inhabitant’s taste and character. Ostensibly separate from the world that required individuals to work for someone else, the home became the place where one worked on oneself. Cohen asserts that “making a good impression had always been important, especially to the middling ranks of society. But the emphasis upon self-expression was new” (84). If inhabitants expected their homes to convey their identities, visitors assumed they did as well. The period’s voyeuristic attitude towards the private realm is on display in novels, which frequently delineated character via domestic interior, and in popular “at-home” articles, which described in minute detail the homes of celebrities like Wilkie Collins and Alfred Tennyson.\(^\text{19}\) Such metonymic readings of people’s interiors arose from the expectation that they “offered a glimpse” into what was “both deliberately constructed and unintentionally revealing” (123) about the individual in question.

The home was also envisioned as the private fiefdom of the individual, with its contents encasing him “so deeply within the dwelling’s interior” (220) that Benjamin likens the activity of buying and arranging the objects within to “fashioning a shell” (221) for one’s person. While collecting and arranging possessions was understood as a means for individuals to construct a sense of self, it also supported a fantasy in which their owner heroically “takes up the struggle against dispersion” (211) by transforming mass-produced items into singular vessels of human sentiment. Both entities are thus rescued from the alienations of capitalism through the efforts of

the mastering subject. Benjamin concludes: “the collector is the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them” (9).

Benjamin’s use of the term “Sisyphean” (invoking endless, ineffective toil) is a clue to what Cohen argues was, by the end of the century, an increasing frustration with the inability to truly divest manufactured objects of their commodity value. Cohen notes that consumers’ oft-expressed dissatisfaction with their décor “stemmed, at least in part, from the impossibility of permanently incarnating oneself in one’s things” (140). But for a great deal of the nineteenth century, many Victorians disavowed this revelation by asserting that only certain individuals were capable of achieving the distinction of character necessary to refashion the material world. Thus the same discursive practices that supported the sovereignty of the subject simultaneously constructed parameters of exclusion from it, and many Victorians, in the words of Timothy Morton, displayed a “delight in bestowing upon or withholding from other beings” the privilege of subjectivity, as if they were “custodians of the subjectivity equivalent of the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame” (63).

Not surprisingly, that exclusion was based on the most essential of bourgeois concepts: private property. Those who could not “have” could not properly “be.” Reflecting what Foucault describes as the binary that modernity creates between free individuals and “bodies” to be surveyed, catalogued and contained within disciplinary institutions (schools, prisons, asylums, poor-houses), social groups lacking ready access to acquisitional forms of individuation were represented as being chiefly governed by the forces of biological determinism. As I discuss in more detail in my second chapter, because women were construed as having weaker constitutions (Taylor and Shuttleworth describe the dominant notion “that women were prisoners of their physiology and reproductive organs [xvi]), their ability to attain subject-sovereignty was
inherently compromised. In my fourth chapter, meanwhile, I examine how colonists appropriated contemporary ideas about the evolution of the human brain to assert that so-called primitive people were constitutionally incapable of “higher” forms of civilization. But it was perhaps the poor and working classes whose subjectivity was most persistently “objectified.” The poor, whose abject subservience was considered by many to be a hereditary condition, were ordered into groups, herded into workhouses, or afforded charity at the cost of personal freedom.

Because these social groups were not seen as having the capacity to distinguish themselves from their milieu, their bodies were often represented as being coterminous with their environments. In his reification of the noble, self-abnegating housewife, John Ruskin describes the home as “a vestal temple,” and the wife as its devoted priestess, an avatar of its “Household gods”: “The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the cold grass may be the only fire at her foot: but home is yet wherever she is” (para. 33). But the “homeless” were even less distinctly embodied. In Heart of Darkness, the bodies of indigenous Africans are similarly avatars of the jungle: “black shapes” (17) that only occasionally individuate into distinct bodies before “the wilderness without a sound took [them] into its bosom again” (23). The degraded state of the poor was frequently conveyed through portrayals of their bodies as merely another feature of a landscape, as in the English tendency to conflate the Irish peasantry with the potatoes it relied upon for sustenance (Gallagher and Greenblatt 115). In Our Mutual Friend, the narrator compares the desperate activities of the starving poor to the operational instincts of hive insects: “In Paris, where nothing is wasted … where wonderful human ants creep out of their holes and pick up every scrap, there is no such thing [as refuse] … There, sharp eyes and sharp stomachs reap even the east wind, and get something out of it” (Dickens 144).

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20 Liza Picard writes on the divisions of the working classes, the lowest being “working men” labourers, then the “intelligent artisan” and above them the “educated working man.”
But the “Sisyphean” aspect of attempting to strip commodities of their market value and replace them with their owner’s “magic circle” of meaning also speaks to the physical and psychic effort required to maintain this constructed idea of mastery. Latour suggests that modernity’s ontological dichotomies make “Mankind” into “a fragile and precious thing at risk of being overwhelmed by Nature, Society, or God” (138). In part, the often remarked-upon stillness of the nineteenth-century home, with its “aversion to the open air” (Benjamin Arcades 216) may have arisen out of the desire to, in the words of Ruskin, “stay what is fleeting” (Stones of Venice, 3:48): to inveigh against the impermanence of the self by embedding it within a spatial still-point, protected from the chaos of the world beyond by a thicket of possessions and a nesting of architectural barriers. Flanders notes that, unlike their nineteenth-century European counterparts,

the English became ever more inward-turning. The small wrought-iron balconies that had decorated so many Georgian houses vanished, seemingly overnight. Thick curtains replaced the airy eighteenth-century windows, as much to block out passers-by who might look in as to prevent the damage wrought by sun and pollution. (xxiv)

Benjamin, meanwhile, remarks upon the nineteenth century’s “beds and armoires … bristling with battlements” (Arcades 212) and notes that even the angles at which furniture was habitually placed carried “an unconscious retention of a posture of struggle and defense” (215). In Great Expectations, the law-clerk Wemmick’s beloved homestead literalizes the period’s penchant for fortification. Though it is the smallest cottage that Pip has ever seen, it has been outfitted with a retractable bridge that spans a deep ditch—to “cut off the communication”—and its rooftop has been “cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns” (206). And yet, as Benjamin argues, the interior itself posed a different kind of threat to the self. He describes the nineteenth-century interior as a space in which “objects gradually take possession of the residence” (Arcades 218), and then quotes Theodor Adorno: “The self is overwhelmed in its own domain by commodities and their historical essence” (220).
Novelistic things give form to this pervasive anxiety about the precariousness of the inhabitant’s mastery. Wall-paper was perhaps the most widely-used representation of Victorian thinghood. On the one hand, wall-paper was a staple of nineteenth-century décor, made affordable to nearly all classes by new industrial techniques and a reduction on paper duties. As well, the vastly expanded variety of patterns and colours available provided ample opportunities for the kinds of individual expression that the period valued so strongly. On the other hand, its ubiquity and its conspicuousness—Cohen notes that designs were “calculated to cause intense amazement to the beholder on first view” (37)—often fomented a sense of being surrounded. In texts like “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” *Basil*, and *The Spoils of Poynton*, wall-paper is represented as predatory, threatening to engulf anything residing inside the four walls it adorned.

What is more, the mental derangement that seemingly animate things often trigger in novels’ protagonists manifests cultural anxieties about the psychological cost of perpetual vigilance over one’s domain. As Sarah Wise notes in *Inconvenient People*, there were far more male lunatics incarcerated in asylums than female ones, an imbalance that many physicians ascribed to the “self-control and conformity” (xix) demanded of Victorian men. Ironically, the “[s]elf-discipline, earnestness, control and restraint” (Dowling 22) intended to bolster subject sovereignty may have paradoxically exacerbated forms of psychic exhaustion. In the infamous 1892 pseudo-medical treatise *Entartung [Degeneration]*, the German physician Max Nordau warns that “Anglo-Saxon” eagerness has brought English civilization to a vulnerable state at the turn of the century:

Trade, industry, and civilization were nowhere in the world so much developed as in England. Nowhere did men work so assiduously, nowhere did they live under such artificial conditions as there. Hence the state of degeneration and exhaustion, which we observe to-day in all civilized countries as the result of this over-exertion, must of necessity have shown itself sooner in England than elsewhere. (75)
Furthermore, as I outline in my third chapter, as the century wore on there was an increasing unease over what kinds of identities were being nurtured behind closed doors, particularly as interiors took on ever-more fantastical qualities. Artists and authors now identified as queer, such as Whistler, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde, were openly dedicated to the “House Beautiful.” Contemporary magazines such as *Punch* implied a connection between a concern for “artistic” interiors and male effeminacy—which, as Foucault points out, was increasingly diagnosed as a symptom of hereditary degeneration. Nordau made the connection more explicit: “the rage for collecting, the piling up, in dwellings, of aimless bric-à-brac” he writes, is the “stigma of degeneration” (27).

By the century’s end, as Janelle Watson argues, the notion of the house as a symbolic manifestation of its owner’s identity eroded “as a result of several factors, notably abundance, specialization, differentiation, and commodification” (159). Elaine Freedgood asserts that mid-Victorians inhabited what she terms a “thing” culture: “a more extravagant form of object relations that ours” (*Ideas* 8) that preceded full-blown commodity culture. Freedgood’s suggestion is convincing because it accounts for the period’s unprecedented enthusiasm for and identification with the profusion of material ephemera created by industry, discovered by science, or imported from the colonies. By the fin-de-siècle, however, the sheer quantity of goods produced and consumed made the idea of their assimilation into their owner’s identity increasingly untenable. In his 1907 text *The Philosophy of Money*, German sociologist Georg Simmel laments: “[w]hat is distressing is that we are basically indifferent to those numerous objects that swarm around us, and this is for reasons specific to a money economy: their impersonal origin and easy replaceability” (460). He adds that the close attachment people professed for their possessions “appears to the younger generation today as an eccentricity on the part of their grandparents.” Similarly, in “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown,” Virginia Woolf argues
that the literary “tools” of modernism’s progenitors have become obsolete; she dismisses especially the tendency of writers like Arnold Bennet to convince his readers that “because he has made a house, there must be a person living there” (16).

**Conclusion**

After the end of the Victorian age, the ontological notion of “things” and their insurrectionary energies remained, but stripped of their once-presumed detrimental influence on subject sovereignty, they were far less often treated as a threat. In fact, the alterity of things was increasingly framed as a quality to be cherished, because it had somehow miraculously evaded the deadening effects of the generalizations and abstractions of “newly triumphant science” (Mao 6-7). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes a notion of thinghood that is increasingly inaccessible because science, and especially modern technology, have stripped things of their mystery and reduced them to nothing but stockpiles of usefulness. Similarly, in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes that to “yield to the object means to do justice to the object’s qualitative moments. Scientific objectification, in line with the quantifying tendency of all science since Descartes, tends to eliminate qualities and transform them into measurable definitions” (43).

In the modern era, the thing replaces the subject as the rare and fragile phenomenon.²¹ It maintains its aura of radical difference through its resistance to epistemological capture, but the wonder and terror of its thingness is no longer construed as a force to be extinguished. Instead, many philosophical and literary texts treat thinghood as an opportunity to freshen one’s perceptions of the world. The thing’s ability to “index a certain limit or liminality” (Brown “Thing Theory” 5) creates the conditions for *augenblick*: a moment of vision that allows the observer to shake off the trappings of clichéd, conventional ways of seeing the world and access

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²¹ Douglas Mao argues that modernity could be constructed as “an affair of consciousness gone awry, a phenomenon of subjectivity grown rapacious and fantastically powerful either with the help of or under the sway of science and expansionist capitalism” (8).
new vantage points. Mao argues that for authors like Ezra Pound and Woolf, “the object world represented something like the last terrain of the utopian (or the prelapsarian) for them at times when consciousness itself seemed both the mark and the substance of exclusion from paradise” (9).

Many modernist thinkers hoped that the object-world could be the savior of humanity. In “Modern Novels,” Woolf describes how modern literature should work to envision methods of portraying the self’s relationship to the world beyond the well-worn concretions of the materialist “Edwardian” writers. “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (189). And as Mao notes, Woolf’s literary works, such as the remarkable “Time Passes” section of To the Lighthouse, “show how the discrete object, as the particular representative or crystallization of nonhuman Being, could exert a powerful hold on the imagination when questions about the meaning of existence seemed particularly pressing” (17).

To my mind, however, the most influential representation of thinghood in the twentieth century came not from literature but cinema. The monolith from Stanley Kubrick’s film 2001 (see. Fig. 1) is both “the thing baldly encountered” and “some thing not quite apprehended” (Brown “Thing Theory” 5): it is “simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague” (Mitchell 156). The giant black rectangular slab, as Roger Ebert notes in his review of the film from 1968, has no clear signification or purpose: “It stands for a monolith without explanation.” At that same time, its presence seems to elicit new forms of perception. When it appears in the midst of a group of pre-hominid apes, for the first time “their attention is drawn beyond themselves and towards an object in the environment.” Kubrick’s film implies, but never
asserts, that the monolith has a hand in humanity’s shift from frightened animal to confident tool-maker to—at the film’s conclusion—a state of being that is barely comprehensible to its viewers.

Figure 1: Screenshot from the “Dawn of Man” sequence in Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Chapter Overview

This project focuses on nineteenth-century prose fictions, mainly novels and novellas. Like many scholars before me who have focused on the period’s remarkable relationship to the material world, I consider the popularity of the Victorian novel to be a fundamental symptom of the nineteenth century’s obsession with things. The attention that these texts lavish on a given character’s possessions; the minuteness with which they catalogue the wares that make up a second-hand store; the descriptions whose sheer length is often a barrier to modern readers’ consumption, all these suggest some of the ways in which the Victorians imagined relations between subjects and objects. Because of this project’s concentration on the Victorians, its literary analysis focuses mainly on mid to late nineteenth-century English texts, but I also draw specifically on one French novel—Joris-Karl Huysmans’s À rebours—because of its influence on Wilde in particular and on critical accounts of queer identity formation more broadly. My
investigation also includes one American text—Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper”—because it foregrounds a very English tradition of domestic fiction, showing the damaging effects of the “angel in the house” phenomenon on the other side of the Atlantic. The chapters proceed chronologically from the 1840s to the early 1900s.

The progression of my chapters follows a pattern similar to the stages of a Victorian subject’s encounter with a thing: namely, the initial (erroneous) assumption of object-mastery; an encounter that estranges a subject from its systems of containment; and the resulting disintegration of the subject’s self-image or worldview. The first chapter examines literary depictions of new institutions of classification that, in the Latourian sense, paradoxically create the hybrid entities that can undermine those categories, building on—rather than taming—the teeming multiplicity of the modern urban metropolis. It focuses on Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, not only because Dickens’s preoccupation with subject-object mergings is one of the most conspicuous of the Victorian era, but also because the text experiments with the figure of the detective as a powerful new enforcer of social—and metaphysical—order. Inspector Bucket, an amalgam of real-life police officers whose exploits Dickens enthusiastically recorded in his weekly magazine *Household Words*, classifies the characters of *Bleak House* by their material environments—most particularly through property. The need for an entity specifically designed to cut through the densely inhabited confusion of London is made especially convincing when pitted against the bloated Court of Chancery, which pulls people and things out of social circulation and suspends them in a state of metaphysical homelessness. The detective’s method of connecting subjects to objects is reassuring for the upper-class characters, whose identity is metonymically attached to their estates, but intrusive to members of the lower-classes, whose lack of property makes their selfhood, in the eyes of the law, unfixed, insubstantial, and therefore easily discarded. This chapter concludes that Dickens ultimately rejects the detective as too rigid
and destructive in his zeal for categorization, and instead endorses Esther Summerson’s self-effacing, socially-responsive networks of connection as a means to remedy the often overwhelming profusion of hybridized entities in the modern era.

The subsequent two chapters turn to the nineteenth-century home, considering the tug-of-war between owners and their possessions in a culture that frequently construed the two entities as analogous. The first of these chapters asks: if private possessions are extensions of their owner’s identities, what happens to individuals who live amongst those possessions but have no power to control them? In domestic-oriented fictions such as Jane Eyre and “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” objects collude with their owners to transform and subdue women’s subjectivities. Female characters’ object-enabled oppression, I argue, is often depicted through the importation of gothic tropes—particularly the grotesque. This chapter therefore disputes traditional interpretations of such gothic “eruptions” in domestic novels as manifestations of a character’s inner psychic turmoil. By drawing on contemporary design movements and disputes over taste, this chapter reveals that the Victorians themselves were conscious of the ambiguous significations created by their “unusually cossetted” interior spaces (J. Brown 61).

The third chapter shifts the focus from wives to bachelors, focusing on moments when the transformative influence of objects is represented as beneficial to the characters involved. The texts studied, À rebours and The Picture of Dorian Gray, represent nineteenth-century strains of queer thought that resist rigid taxonomies of being. Des Esseintes’s efforts to stabilize and reify his own personality within his deliberately isolated home paradoxically unmoors it, as his increasingly spiritual outlook is connected to the physiological effects of his collection of religious artefacts. Des Esseintes is left with the choice between, in the words of Barbey D’Aurevilly, “the muzzle of a pistol and the foot of the cross”: between annihilation and
transformation of the self. In contrast, the objects in Dorian Gray’s collection remain inert, I argue, because Dorian has been insulated from their influence by his portrait, itself a mysterious and malevolent thing that diverts the effects of the young aristocrat’s “sins” away from his physiology and with them, any opportunities for growth and change.

The final chapter veers away from the domestic hearth and home to interrogate subject-object relations as they are constructed on the borders of imperialist expansion. Here the Victorian project of object-mastery is at its most overt—and receives its most pointed and ominous resistance. In the romances of H. Rider Haggard (King Solomon’s Mines and She) and H. G. Wells (The Time Machine), mysterious statues transfix the Western explorers, challenging their concepts of civilization as a linear, cumulative development (with England at the pinnacle). In their interactions with the statues, the protagonists evince the kinds of fetishism Victorians habitually projected onto non-modern civilizations, ascribing a latent and malevolent agency to the structures. As I argue, their use of the discourse of fetishism is not a lapse into more “primitive” forms of subject-object relation but a rhetorical means to avoid absorbing the object into the constitution of the imperium. This “rhetoric of thinghood” reveals a late-century aversion to colonial objects that is a symptom of a growing pessimism with regard to the Victorian project of completing a universal “order of things.”

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22 Huysmans quotes this line approvingly in his revised preface to À rebours.
“That’s What You Are!”: 
Detectives as Agents of Purification in *Bleak House* and *Household Words*

“Data! data! data! I can’t make bricks without clay.”
—Sherlock Holmes, “The Copper Beeches”

*Bleak House*’s Sir Leicester Dedlock, who is eminently proud of his ancient if relatively unremarkable aristocratic lineage, frequently decries the breakdown of traditional hierarchies that, in his mind, clearly delineate societal roles and obligations. Upon learning that his loyal housekeeper’s son has rejected his family’s generations-long dedication to a life of service, and even more distressingly, is active in politics and campaigning in opposition to Sir Leicester’s party, he laments that it is “a remarkable example of the confusion into which the present age has fallen; of the obliteration of landmarks, the opening of floodgates, and the uprooting of distinctions” (414).

Sir Leicester’s complaint articulates the thematic core of the novel: though his diatribe is principally concerned with loss of class distinctions, his description of the “obliteration of landmarks” and “uprooting of distinctions” reflects the text’s broader preoccupation with loss of ontological distinctions. In the teeming metropolis of *Bleak House*’s London, many characters have been unmoored from traditional connections to class, family, and geography. Seemingly as a result of the instability of their identities, some characters experience a kind of metaphysical levelling and begin to merge with their surroundings. In *Bleak House*, to quote Hisup Shin, “[a]s things and people coalesce, they tend to adopt characteristics from one another, thus unsettling the notion that the human subject governs the realm of objects.” Mr. Jellyby, for instance, is introduced as a “non-entity” whose personality has, in the words of Mr. Kenge, “[m]erged … in the more shining qualities of his wife” (45). Meanwhile their daughter Caddy is so overcome by her endless dictational duties that she is reduced to a “state of ink” (47). Though she successfully escapes from her misery through marriage, her child is born with “curious little dark veins in its
face and curious little dark marks under its eyes like faint remembrances of poor Caddy’s inky days” (710). More famously, Krook’s death by spontaneous combustion disperses his body throughout his rag-and-bone shop, mimicking the disorderly circulations of the refuse upon which he scavenged. Throughout the text, the grotesque bodies of lower-class characters are likened to actual litter in the form of bundles and piles of rags, their physiology reflecting their social condition.23 Dickens’s “law of conversion of spirit into matter” (422), as Van Ghent calls it, is frequently on display in *Bleak House* when characters are overtaken by some kind of irresistible influence, whether it is a domineering personality, an all-encompassing institution, or even a particularly cluttered interior.

This chapter, therefore, does not focus on characters’ fear of specific “things.” Instead, it considers the socio-political structures that contributed to the culture’s notions of individuated subjectivity as a phenomenon to be protected from corruption. The novel’s obsession with contagion centres on the activities of the Court of Chancery. The court served to bolster modern forms of identity: its focus on wills and estates perpetuated notions of individual rights based on ownership. In the novel, however, the court’s mandate is tragically inverted. The case of *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, essentially a dispute over the rightful possessor of a sizeable inheritance, instead possesses *people*, pulling them into its universe of endless delay and complication. Those who attempt to engage with it directly have their identities distorted by contact: Miss Flite is been driven mad by the case, while Richard Carstone—whose aimlessness “internalizes the procedural protractions of the court” (Miller *Novel* 63)—is unable to commit to any other occupation that would allow him to form an identity separate from the case.

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23 When Guppy and Jobling attempt to rouse the drunken Krook, the narrator notes that “it would seem as easy to wake a bundle of old clothes, with a spirituous heat smouldering in it” (303). The urchin Jo wears clothes that “look, in colour and in substance, like a bundle of rank leaves of swampy growth, that rotted long ago” (659). Before his death, his corporeality fragments, and he “stands huddled together in a bundle” (669).
As I explain in further detail below, the chaos created by the court’s legal proceedings reflects Bruno Latour’s description of the ironies attending modern systems of classification: that in attempting to segregate the topography of the world into coherent categories, they in fact muddy the ontological waters, producing ever more mediated, arbitrary, and implausible mixtures. Characters pulled into systems of ordering like the Court of Chancery are unable to move forward in their lives or evince any human autonomy until the court finally defines their “being in the world.” In a novel preoccupied with how to thrive in a world made up of such dehumanizing practices, the first-person narrator Esther Summerson provides an example of a character who, with no traditional markers of identity to draw on, is able to individuate without adopting the self-defining pomposity of charlatans like Harold Skimpole, but who likewise eludes the helplessness of the downtrodden lower classes.

Though I will be discussing Esther in passing, this chapter focuses on a character whose occupation is posited as a possible institutional solution to the problem of wayward things and people: Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police. Bucket’s character has historically been sidelined in critical considerations, dismissed as flat or under-formed. A. Craig Bell describes Bucket as “little more than a dummy figure, appearing now and then to help in the unravelling of the plot” (197). Ian Ousby is more charitable, and points to Bleak House as contributing to “the development of … the stereotype of the detective” (82) that would reach its apotheosis in Sherlock Holmes. More recent critics have considered Bucket less as a rudimentary prototype and more as a vessel through which Dickens interrogates nineteenth-century Britain’s “emerging economies of knowledge” (Ben-Merre 47). In his extensive argument about the Detective Police being an “easily comprehensible version of order” against the “ultimate unlocalizability” of the court’s operations (60), D. A. Miller describes Bucket chiefly as a “representation of the containment” of ordering power (75). Ronald R. Thomas, meanwhile, argues that Bucket
represents a “new kind of legal and cultural authority” (52) that is being tacitly compared to older models like the courts of law, as well as traditional socially and culturally based forms of knowing. Similarly, Chappell contends that Bucket is but one of “multiple reading characters in the story” that “allegorize its readers’ active search for meaning” (801).

Though my analysis is inspired by critical considerations of *Bleak House* as a novel concerned with testing the viabilities of various ordering systems, it begins from the conviction that Bucket is the focus of Dickens’s prolonged consideration of the detective—and London’s new metropolitan police force in general—as an entity that can potentially impose systemic classification, remedying the “strife and sound” (233) of modern urban life. More specifically, this chapter argues that Bucket functions for Dickens as an agent of *purification*, to borrow a phrase from Bruno Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*: his mandate throughout the novel is to positively identify the seemingly “lost” or counterfeit things and people of London and re-attach them to their proper domains. In other words, he classifies and contains, ensuring that unbounded entities do not circulate beyond their proscribed “zones” to create new, unsettling hybrid forms.

Conceiving of Bucket as his creator’s literary exploration of enforceable classification contextualizes his often contradictory traits, which are frequently addressed by critics but not always given extended theoretical attention.24 One exception is Steig and Wilson, who usefully suggest that the paradoxes in Bucket’s behaviour arise from the author’s “ambivalent admiration of ‘omnicompetent’ characters” (290). My first chapter concentrates on this ambivalence, considering Dickens’s experimentation with respect to his brief but intense enthusiasm for real-life detectives, which he expressed in several articles dedicated to the subject in his weekly journal, *Household Words*. In these articles, Dickens’s often hyperbolic praise for the detectives’

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24 D. A. Miller suggests that Bucket’s ambiguity comes from the fact that his character takes on the roles of numerous agents of policing: “The fact that the representation of the police is virtually entirely confined to the portrayal of this one character is of course revealing of the strategy of containment taken toward the police” (78).
seemingly superhuman ability to locate lost property or to positively identify disguised criminals is tinged with covert anxiety about the unfettered access their mandate of systemic classification—which frequently involves encroaching onto private property or assuming disguises—requires. In other words, Bucket’s activities in *Bleak House* demonstrate the essential paradox of detective work: that it undermines the city’s proscribed boundaries—both social and metaphysical—that it is ostensibly meant to bolster.

Ultimately, Bucket’s skills invoke more wariness than admiration in *Bleak House*’s characters, and the relentlessness with which he captures entities and consigns them to predetermined domains is implicitly contrasted with Esther Summerson’s more fluid, contextual approach to encouraging “orderliness.” Rather than affixing them into metaphysical holding pens with repeated assertions of “that’s what you are” (Bucket’s catchphrase), Esther’s management of the people in her sphere of influence works from an assumption that identity is fluid and contextual. For instance, she is able to live with a man who is not her father, or even her male relation, without suffering any risk to her reputation because other members of their circle recognize that the complexity and closeness of their relationship cannot be reduced to state-sanctioned categories. As described in further detail below, Esther constructs networks of cross-class interdependency where identities are not pigeonholed into proscribed categories, but are malleable and context-dependent.

**Latour’s Modernity and the Court of Chancery**

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour argues that the condition of being “modern” is not the result of secularization, industrialization, or scientific progress. Rather, he argues, it arises from an ideology of classification that he calls *purification*: the Western world’s expansive effort to segregate the universe into distinct domains. In a “purified” modern world, law is

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25 In fact the only character who disapproves Jarynyce’s proposed “family” is the Lord Chancellor, who is more concerned about placing the lovely young ward of the court, Ada Clare, in a home with two bachelors. His Lordship only approves the unusual arrangement because of Esther’s presence as a “suitable companion” (40).
separate from religion, science is separate from politics, nature is separate from culture, and most pressingly, humans are separate from non-humans. For modernity to maintain its self-image as distinct from “primitive” ways of conceiving the world, those domains must remain “pure.” They may interact with each other, but they cannot be confused.

But purification is only the acknowledged half of modern thinking, obscuring the oppositional practice of hybridization that attends it: the inevitable construction of entities that mix politics, science, technology, and nature. This, Latour contends, is the paradox at the heart of modernity: “the more we forbid ourselves to conceive of hybrids, the more possible their interbreeding becomes” (12). In order to maintain the illusion of clear dichotomies, modern industrialized societies must constantly produce new, ever more powerful and complex intermediaries to bolster them. Using this perspective, the detective as originally conceived of in the 1850s was a specialized, “hybrid” version of the also recently created police officer, a paramilitary enforcer of social order developed in response to the unprecedented disorder and rioting fomented by the conditions of modern urban existence.26

Latour argues that it is our current epoch’s over-saturation of hybrids—perplexing by-products of modern innovation such as hybrid corn, frozen embryos, carbon emissions—that is finally forcing us to “cave in” (50) and contend with their existence.27 But as noted in my dissertation’s introduction, the Victorians’ devotion to cataloguing and classifying the rich materiality of their world also reveals an attendant preoccupation with entities that resist containment within proscribed categories. Dickens in particular revelled in depicting ontologically indeterminate entities—often to the consternation of his more classically minded

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27 Latour describes these entities as “quasi-objects” because their impact on the world crosses over modern dichotomies between the human and nonhuman worlds. On the one hand, frozen embryos are human: their ontology evokes religious concerns with the sanctity of human life. On the other, they were created in a lab, and are therefore divorced from the “natural” world. Which “domain” and its rules of procedure should claim them?
contemporaries—reflecting, in Gallagher’s words, the “ontological uncertainty” of the nineteenth century (189).  

*Bleak House*’s famous opening is an extended meditation on one of his world’s more conspicuous nature-culture hybrids: London’s famous fog. It descends on both natural scenes (it flows “among green aits and meadows” [11]) and social, technologized ones (in the city of London, where the gas-powered street lights are “looming through” the haze). The fog represents, on the one hand, transcendent and unchanging nature, having permeated the region when the Megalosaurus waddled “like an elephantine lizard up Holburn-hill” eons ago. The fog is also, simultaneously, a by-product of human industry, thickened and coloured by population density and pollutants from factory “chimney-pots,” whose plummeting soot is likened to falling rain. The third-person narrator focuses on the fog’s omnipresence: the nooks and crannies it permeates, the classes of people that inhale it into their bodies, and the streets both high and low that it blankets. The description highlights the irony underpinning Latour’s concept of modern systems of purification, as “purity” evokes allegedly primitive religious concerns that had long since been officially excised from modern public life. Throughout the novel, the third-person narrator homes in on London’s fog and other boundless entities such as odours, rain, mud, and pestilence, emphasizing their potential to contaminate as they drift across borders and boundaries and seep into everything they touch.  

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28 Freedgood notes that Dickens’s enthusiasm for extensive description has “long caused considerable critical discomfort” (*Ideas* 129). Hippolyte Taine complains that “enthusiasm seizes [Dickens] in connection with everything, especially in connection with vulgar objects,” while H. G. Lewes unfavourably compares many of Dickens’s characters to vivisected frogs (Kaminsky 101).  

29 The third-person narrator’s fear of contagion is perhaps one his most discernible traits—and one that the text’s other narrator, Esther Summerson, does not share. He warns that political attempts to bring the slum known as Tom-all-alone’s to order will fail: “it shall pollute” (654). He couches the threat in terms of its ability to overcome divisions of class or geography: “There is not an atom of Tom’s slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him … but shall work its retribution, though every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud.” See Robert E. Loughy’s “Filth, Abjection and Liminality in *Bleak House*” *ELH*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2002, pp. 473-500.
The fog is merely the prelude to the novel’s main “corruptor” of interest, the Court of Chancery. Dickens’s attack on the inefficiency of nineteenth-century Equity is noteworthy, because when Latour wishes to explain how the modern world has become overrun with hybrids, he writes that its purification systems have “become as clogged as our judicial system” (50). The Equity branch of the law was originally conceived as a remedy to the “universality of Common Law, which treated everybody alike” (Hamer 342). The court endeavoured to provide space for special circumstances to be attended to with respect to estates, inheritances and trusts, allowing judges to rule on conscience instead of precedent and, in theory, giving space to recognize the singularity of the individuals concerned. But as the court modernized, its mandate to “to allow every bit of evidence to be presented and discussed, every point of law to be made, every argument to be freely debated” (344) was taken to unprecedented extremes as the result of innovations in paper manufacture, the increasing specialization and professionalization of solicitors, and easier travel and the centralization of the courts—all of which, Dickens implies had by the nineteenth century protracted the court’s operations to ever more legendary lengths. In his nightmarish depiction of the court’s activities, the oppressions that Chancery was intended to abolish were, to use Latour’s phrasing, “magnified … immeasurably” (8). The third-person narrator of the novel frequently compares the activities of the court to the effects of London’s fog, “binding together the various constituents … into a paralyzed and moribund unity” (Ousby 91).

_Break House_ also condemns the arbitrariness of the court’s rules of procedure, whose complexities have the appearance of taming the wild profusions of the human world while never providing actual clarity. The solicitors involved in _Jarndyce and Jarndyce_ complicate the case beyond measure using the court’s tools of ordering: “bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, masters’ reports” (12), which are all piled
before them in an increasingly unwieldy bundle. The names of Miss Flite’s pet birds narrate the destructive effects of the court’s procedures on the unsuspecting, while the oddity of her nomenclature mimics the arbitrariness of its categories of meaning.\footnote{Flite’s birds: “Hope, Joy, Youth, Pace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach” (217).} Much like Borges’s famous fictional Chinese encyclopedia, which strikes Foucault because of its “unusual juxtapositions” (Order xvi), the bird’s names, inspired by Flite’s bemused experience with the court, expose the fact that the internal coherence of any system of ordering rests entirely on consensus. *Bleak House* stresses that in spite of the pandemonium of Chancery’s proceedings, its practitioners insist upon its purity—they maintain that it is, in the words of John Jarndyce’s lawyer Kenge, a “stately vista in the pillars of the profession” (876). In his overview of Latour, Russell Hogg argues that the institution of law in particular seeks to be the ultimate pure entity: “an autonomous body of legal doctrine, unified and coherent” (397). Moreover, it purports to purify all other affairs and entities by self-reference. When the law is properly applied, it clarifies the ambiguous and makes decisions based on codes of precedent and established doctrine. In fulfilling its mandate, however, the court “depends on the creation of other agents, procedures, and objects which are exogenous to the bodies of doctrine [that the courts] are to administer.” In other words, the power, effects, and reach of systems of law depend on the complex networks of agencies, procedures, objects and knowledges they must necessarily create but that they simultaneously keep separate. In *Bleak House*, Dickens painstakingly depicts the many entities caught within the orbit of Chancery: its suitors, wards, folio-pages, solicitors, court dates, clerks, wills, trusts, and stationers. Even those who deal with the court’s material refuse are included, such as Krook, who hoards discarded law documents, and the urchin Jo, who sweeps the dust from the crossings around the Court of Chancery.
Though he is part of the same legal system as Chancery, Inspector Bucket is the court’s counterpoint: where Chancery delays making definitive verdicts until every iota of data is considered, Bucket and his “fat forefinger” cut through the muddle with superhuman quickness. The character’s seemingly boundless potentiality reflects what Latour argues is the relentless faith that moderns possess in their new innovations—that they will remedy the chaos created by former ones—thus ensuring an endless concatenation of ever more powerful and unruly hybrids. Inspector Bucket is the figurehead of London’s professionalized police force, which was in the process of replacing London’s old system of ad-hoc “barbarous watchmen” (158), personified in *Bleak House* by the bumbling and much-ridiculed beadle. However, the text is unclear whether Bucket’s detective work is beneficial or detrimental, as his alliances shift dramatically based on circumstance, and generally the characters are wary with respect to this new “model of modernity” (Summerscale xxi)—an attitude that is in notable contrast to the seemingly unqualified praise that Dickens himself was contemporaneously showering upon London’s new detective force in his weekly magazine, *Household Words*. The differences between *Bleak House* and *Household Words* shed light on the complexities of Dickens’s thinking with respect to the detective’s role in potentially fulfilling his culture’s yearning for order.

**The Detectives of Household Words**

In a series of articles in the early 1850s, *Household Words* presents the detective as a paragon of modern efficiency, science, innovation, and most particularly, purification. As Moderns, he explains, must “construct an image of time that is adapted to the miraculous emergence of new things that have always already been there, and to human fabrications that no human has ever made. The idea of radical revolution is the only solution the moderns have imagined to explain the emergence of hybrids that their Constitution simultaneously forbids and allows” (70).

As with many modern innovations, the detective force became a source of imaginative engagement, and numerous critics note the similarities between the reception of the detective force and that of a new and exciting invention. Ian Ousby argues that the British public considered the detective force as “an intriguing innovation, a sign of changing times” (81). Shpayer-Makov describes the detectives as a “collective entity” that “emerge[s]” out of the “newly formed” police force, and Stephan Wade describes the public’s relish for “this new breed of men” (40) whom Victorians discerned as being “interesting, sometimes charismatic and in most cases puzzling creatures who had almost special powers, aspects of character separating them from ordinary mortals” (44).
Heather Worthington states, in Dickens’s hands the new detective force “became professionals whose entire purpose in life was the detection and apprehension of the criminals that threaten an orderly society with disorder” (162). In the “The Modern Science of Thieftaking,” which seeks to introduce the detective force to the public, the author explicitly defines thieftaking (later changed to “detection”) as a “science” against thievery’s “art” (368)—a science that consists of expert and unerring classification:

As a connoisseur can determine the painter of a picture at the first glance, or a wine-taster the precise vintage of a sherry by the merest sip; so the Detective at once pounces upon the authors of the work of art under consideration, by the style of the performance, if not upon the precise executant, upon the “school” to which he belongs. (369)

A “school,” the featured detective explains, classifies thieves by their associates and by what methods they use to thieve. The mysterious and threatening criminal is therefore transformed for the middle-class audience of Household Words into a predictable and contained—and therefore conquerable—species. Similarly, in “A Detective Police Party,” the narrator emphasizes the detectives’ powers of identification: “Every man of them, in a glance, immediately takes an inventory of the furniture and an accurate sketch of the editorial presence. The Editor feels that any gentleman in the company could take him up, if need should be, without the smallest hesitation, twenty years hence” (1.18; 410). As a foil against the “Protean dexterity” (1.16; 368) of the London criminal underground, who are able to slip into false identities in order to defraud the British public, the Detective functions by identifying members of the “swell mob” (well-dressed thieves and swindlers). “As if by magic” (370) a carousing group of disguised thieves, for instance, is silenced by the “bull’s eye glare” (368) of Sergeant Witchem of the Detective Police.

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34 Dickens’s thinly-veiled alias for the real-life Sergeant Whicher, whom Dickens interviewed for the story.
More strikingly, in contrast to the heaps of stultifying waste piling up in *Bleak House*, objects in the *Household Words* detective stories are positioned as stable signifiers of identity that the expert detective is able to read and recover. A lost shirt button at the scene of a crime is tracked to a servant with a “deficiency of dress” (1:16; 369), while a thief on the run is captured as a result of his unusual carpet bag (1.20; 459). In “The Metropolitan Protectives,” the police officers are daily prepared with descriptions of persons “missing” from the previous night: “the colours of their hair, eyes, and clothes; as to the cut of their coats, the fashion and material of their gowns, the shape of their hats or bonnets, the make of their boots” (98). Similarly, “lost articles of property” are “enumerated and described with equal exactness.” The narrator enthuses:

> When we reflect that the same routine is being performed at the same moment at the head of every police regiment or division in the Metropolis, *it seems extraordinary how any thing or any person can be lost in London.* Among the trifles enumerated as “found” are a horse and cart, a small dog, a brooch, a baby, and a firkin of butter. (98; my emphasis)

In these *Household Words* articles, the Metropolitan Police in general and detectives in particular remedy the disorganized jumbles that often overwhelm Dickens’s fictional worlds: for the police, no person or thing is ever unaccounted for. They only require sufficient investigation to be placed within their proper realm of order.

Dickens, briefly, held the detective force in such high esteem that many of his contemporaries and admirers found his effusiveness somewhat embarrassing. George Augustus Sala, a friend of Dickens and a witness to his meetings with the detectives in the *Household Words* editorial office, remarked that his love of the police was “curious and almost morbid” (95), while mid-twentieth-century critics like Philip Collins have interpreted the articles as evidence of Dickens’s “boyish hero-worship” (206). Recently, however, Worthington, Stephan Wade, and Keith Easley have been more sensitive to the articles’ covert “wariness” (Easley 96) in response to the detectives’ attitudes and behaviour towards the lower class. Part of the unease
that pervades the articles on the Detective Police arises from the narrator’s emphasis on the similarities the between the set of skills that detectives share with the criminals they pursue, including a willingness to adopt fluid identities: to use disguise and deception to further their ends. The narrator of the second instalment of “The Detective Police Party” notes the metamorphosis a “smooth-faced officer” undergoes when describing a case in which he worked undercover as a butcher: “Even while he spoke, he became a greasy, sleepy, shy, good-natured, chuckle-headed, unsuspicious, and confiding young butcher. His very hair seemed to have suet in it” (457). The officer’s manner of speaking even takes on “the confiding snigger of a foolish young butcher.”

Though the ease with which the officer takes on the mannerisms and appearance of another person is meant to impress the reader with the innovative abilities of this investigative force, it also unsettles the boundaries between law enforcement and the criminal underworld. That fluidity is also evident in the occasionally sympathetic relationship shared between police and criminals in many of the articles. When Sergeant Witchem exposes and arrests the famous horse-thief “Tally-ho Thompson,” the thief begs him not to place him in handcuffs. Witchem accedes, and before they leave for London they share a glass of brandy. Afterwards Thompson allegedly “praised [Witchem] up to the skies” (1.18; 413).

This “closeness” between thief and thief-taker is also evident in the detectives’ dependence on building strong social networks within the criminal world. The articles emphasize the officers’ reliance on slumlords, informants, and other denizens of the underworld in order to acquire their knowledge of criminals. In one revealing story from “Three ‘Detective’ Anecdotes,” Witchem recovers a lost diamond pin by touching the back of the thief’s hand—“a secret sign among the criminal fraternity” (Easley 96). The thief, mistakenly thinking the touch comes from his companion, readily hands over the stolen pin. In essence, Witchem must
temporarily become one of the criminals in order to perform his duty. Though the detective force is relatively new, the hidden work of hybridization is already evident in its activities.

The detective force’s propensity for subverting social boundaries often leads to moments when the detectives themselves trample over physical ones, particularly with respect to the lower classes. The narrator stresses that no landlord in the impoverished slum of Saint Giles would dare bar his door against Field, and the inspector displays no hesitation in accosting the inhabitants within. In one particularly revealing passage Dickens emphasizes the powerlessness of the impoverished against the detectives’ panoptical glare of classification:

Again, in these confined intolerable rooms … are crowds of sleepers, each in his foul trundle-bed coiled up beneath a rug. Halloa here! Come! Let us see you! Shew your face! Pilot Parker goes from bed to bed and turns their slumbering heads towards us, as a salesman might turn sheep. … Wherever the turning lane of light becomes stationary for a moment, some sleeper appears at the end of it, submits himself to be scrutinized, and fades away into the darkness. (“On Duty” 268)

The occupants of Saint Giles are reduced to mere livestock to be manhandled, scrutinized, and cast aside without explanation. Though Household Word readers were unlikely to think of the lower classes as possessing any property rights, and though the narrator in these articles never explicitly offers anything but praise for the officers and their methods, the incidents he finds noteworthy often serve to highlight the heavy-handed intrusiveness of the detectives’ methods. A similar atmosphere of discomfort attends the characterization of Bucket, whose own “bull’s eye glare” (Dickens Bleak House 331) is not limited to the lower classes.

**Inspector Bucket of Bleak House**

While the Household Words articles display an unresolved inconsistency between the praise heaped upon the detectives and the more unsettling depictions of their activities, Bleak House provides a much more nuanced and prolonged meditation on the “detective” and his place in nineteenth-century English society, both as a much-needed agent of order and as a new,
powerful entity whose effects on the social fabric of London were still unknown and potentially highly disruptive.

Bucket is introduced to the reader as a character seemingly conjured out of thin air. The law stationer Mr. Snagsby, in the process of being interrogated by the ruthless guardian of upper-class secrets, Mr. Tulkinghorn, suddenly “gives a great start,” exclaiming, “Dear me, sir, I wasn’t aware there was any other gentleman present!” (328). At least from Mr. Snagsby’s perspective, the “person with a hat and stick in hand” has appeared out of nowhere, neither entering “by the door or by either of the windows” or providing any step “audible upon the floor.” Much like a newborn baby, Bucket arrives to the narrative as a “blank slate”: “Except that he looks at Mr. Snagsby as if he were going to take his portrait, there is nothing remarkable about him at first sight but his ghostly manner of appearing.” Instead of depicting Bucket as an exciting new innovation, as he did with his accounts of real-life detectives in *Household Words*, Dickens presents Bucket as somewhat unreal: his presence is uncanny rather than exciting. However troubling his character, the text is clear that the universe of *Bleak House* needs an agent of purification like Bucket. In contrast to Chancery and its comic mirrors (Krook’s junk shop and Mrs Jellyby’s paper-choked household), which are incapable of producing anything but waste and clutter, Bucket shares with his *Household Words* counterparts the ability to stabilize lost and wayward entities by positively identifying them and assigning them to their proper domains.

Bucket’s ability to find “lost” items and people sometimes exceeds even the boundaries of the novel’s omniscient narrator’s scope. Bucket recovers the final version of the Jarndyce will, the existence of which even the third-person narrator never mentions. He also rescues it from

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35 Nonetheless, Bucket is still presented as a “model of modernity,” as unlimited in his reach and mobility as “the electric telegraph, and the railway train” (Summerscale xx). As a character he seems to have the uncanny ability to be, in the words of the terrified Jo, in “all manner of places, all at wunst” (663). Bucket is also apparently invulnerable to the contagions that infect the city’s other occupants. He is left untouched by the fever that infects Charley and Esther, even though his contact with the contagious Jo was just as intimate. He is similarly unaffected by the “dreadful air” (331) of the slum Tom-all-alone, which Mr. Snagsby tries in vain to avoid breathing in.
Smallweed’s avaricious clutches, and places it in the hands of its “proper” owner, John Jarndyce. Bucket thus solves in an instant what the court of Chancery could not—or would not—in decades. Similarly, he is able to identify Mademoiselle Hortense as Tulkinghorn’s murderer by recovering her revolver, which she had discarded in a pond. Neither the document nor the gun had previously existed in the narrative: they seem to be willed into being by Bucket for the sole purpose of bringing closure to the text.

In addition to stabilizing objects, Bucket also defines the characters of Bleak House within clear, stable categories. His oft-repeated phrase “that’s what you are” is used either to cajole other characters into behaving a certain way, or conversely, to intimidate characters into submission by stating that he “knows” their true selves. When Snagsby shows a reluctance to involve the poor street-sweeper Jo in Tulkinghorn’s mysterious scheme, Bucket assures him: “You’re a man of the world, you know, and a man of business, a man of sense. That’s what you are” (329), before appealing to Snagsby’s sense of professionalism (and avarice) in assisting his “real good customer,” Tulkinghorn. In contrast, Bucket makes a “bow of recognition to [Sir Leicester’s] dilapidated Cousin, to whom it airily says, ‘You are a swell about town, and you know me, and I know you’” (746).

Bucket’s skill for “knowing” also proves to be socially useful. When Esther Summerson learns that Harold Skimpole had treacherously revealed the location of the dangerously ill Jo to Bucket in return for a “fypunnote,” she remarks that his behaviour seems to pass “the usual bounds of his childish innocence” (810). Bucket assures her that upon their initial introduction he had no doubt that Skimpole would take the offered bribe:

> Whenever a person says to you that they are as innocent as can be in all concerning money, look well after your own money, for they are dead certain to collar it if they can. Whenever a person proclaims to you ‘In worldly matters I’m a child,’ you consider that that person is only a-crying off from being held accountable and that you have got that person’s number, and that person is
Number One … So this rule. Fast and loose in one thing, fast and loose in everything. I never knew it to fail. No more will you. Nor no one. (810)

In a single declarative paragraph, Bucket evaluates the bewildering Skimpole with refreshing finality, delineating his character according to pre-set “rules” governing his behaviour. He is no longer a perplexing individual but merely a variation on a type: a member of a group with which Bucket is all too familiar.

Surprisingly, rather than fight against Bucket’s often reductive and frequently patronizing designations, many of the characters seem to highly desire them. Middle-class characters in particular—the social group most invested in acquisitive models of individuation—grasp whatever positive identifiers they can to in order to structure a stable sense of self. (Esther Summerson, whose construction of self is legendarily fractured—not only in the sense of being both subject and object of her narration, but also with respect to her propensity for abnegation—is the exception to this rule.) As discussed previously, unfortunates such as Miss Flite, Mr. Gridley, and Richard Carstone, whose social identities have been unmoored by *Jarndyce and Jarndyce*, paradoxically rely on the case to furnish them with a sense of identity and purpose. In particular, the orphaned Ada Clare, contingently defined as the court’s “ward” until the case settles, constructs a more comprehensible identity as Richard’s loyal and dutiful wife in spite of her forebodings that their marriage will be doomed by his imprudence.

The middle-class characters’ willingness to rely on institutions to assign identity is understandable considering the fates of *Bleak House*’s lower-class characters, whose poverty is not only economic but metaphysical. The nameless brickmakers, for instance, are virtually identical in their drunken, resentful brutality, and their more sympathetic wives Liz and Jenny are so interchangeable that they are presented as mothers to the same child.36 Jo, whose name

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36 When Bucket remarks to Jenny that “you seem as fond of [the baby] as if you were the mother yourself,” she responds, “I was the mother of one like it, master, and it died” (333).
lacks an “e” to complete it, has no family, home, or any other marker of stable identity. But at least Jo enjoys the privilege of corporeal differentiation: similar to the flock of sheep-like slumberers in the slums of Saint Giles, the denizens of the slum Tom-all-alone’s are depicted not as individuals but as a seething mass of miserable humanity. When Bucket and Snagsby descend upon the slum in search of Jo, the inhabitants are portrayed as a single entity that “flows round, and from its squalid depths obsequious advice heaves up to Mr. Bucket,” then “fades away and flits about them up the alleys, and in the ruins, and behind the walls, as before” (331).

In fact the only characters who resist Bucket’s ready categorization of them are the upper-class Dedlocks. Already secure in their identities as a result of their aristocratic wealth and holdings, they have no need for Bucket’s ontological assurances, and treat his presence as a lamentable necessity. Not accustomed to this kind of serenity of place and person, Bucket languishes slightly in their presence. Worthington argues that his “ignorance of correct social custom” (168) is revealed in his repeatedly addressing Sir Leicester by his full title, “Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet,” but equally it exposes the abundance of speciation and distinction available to the upper classes.

Bucket’s existence as a professional agent of purification leads to many of his greatest triumphs, but Bleak House also demonstrates that his pigeonholing causes him to skirt over vital complexities. His conviction that objects “belong” to certain people is in evidence when he disguises Hortense in Lady Dedlock’s clothes so that Jo can identify her as the mysterious woman who had asked him about Nemo. However, Jo’s confusion over the fact that the veiled figure’s accoutrements do not match the voice and hand he remembers—that “it is her and it an’t her” (336)—foreshadows Bucket’s failure to identify the “proper” lonely wanderer in his search for Lady Dedlock. Because Bucket relies so completely on objects as corroborators of people’s

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37 Bucket’s description of Jo can, within the confines of the slum, refer to “Carrots, or the Colonel, or Gallows, or Young Chisel, or Terrier Tips, or Lanky, or the Brick” (331), further establishing his fragmented identity.
identities, Lady Dedlock is able to temporarily outwit the detective by simply discarding her clothes and switching them with Jenny’s. Bucket works on the assumption that everyone has a stable identity, which makes him unable to anticipate Lady Dedlock’s desire to nullify her own.

Bucket’s zeal for categorization is similarly unmoored by Gridley’s behaviour on his deathbed. Having pursued him to Sir George’s shooting gallery with plans to arrest him for threatening Tulkinghorn, Bucket finds that all that is left of “the man from Shropshire” is “the faintest shadow of an object full of form and colour” (371). His corporeality dissipates into abstraction, as if his body has been vampirically drained away by the court. Unnerved by Gridley’s transformation, Bucket tries to rouse him back to his old, court-appointed identity through a reminder of the social roles they both inhabit: “You’ll lose your temper with the whole round of ‘em, again and again; and I shall take you on a score of warrants yet, if I have luck” (372). When asked by Sir George what Bucket intends to do with Gridley, the detective loses confidence: “I don’t know yet,” he admits, before he again urges Gridley to re-assume his persona as the wrathful antagonist of the court: “[h]aven’t I seen you in the Fleet over and over again for contempt? Haven’t I come into court, twenty afternoons for no other purpose than to see you pin the Chancellor like a bull-dog?” (372). However destructive or harmful to the individual, Bucket insists that human beings maintain stable identities within socially legible categories. Ultimately, in his attempts to bring Gridley back to himself, Bucket fails to perceive that Gridley has died.

Bucket’s insensitivity to the suffering of others is most overt in his treatment of Jo, whom he drives out of London on the slim possibility that the street urchin might unintentionally expose Lady Dedlock’s secret visit to Captain Hawdon’s burial site. But his cruelty towards an orphaned boy is perfectly consistent with Bucket’s mandate of purification. Jo is dangerous because he has no state-sanctioned domains to which he can be affixed: he is, as the third-person
narrator observes, “of no order and no place” (669). There is no social identity available to Jo except that of a wandering tramp, which Bucket insists upon when he orders the boy to keep “moving along.”

Contrast Bucket’s treatment of Jo with Esther’s, whose charitable aid to the sick boy and her resulting illness cause the “rough outcast” to become “entangled … in the web of very different lives” (675). Previously unacquainted characters like Mr. Woodhouse and Mr. George forge social bonds as a result of the care they provide to Jo, which they do in honour of Esther’s sacrifice. Unlike Bucket’s all-encompassing, taxonomic approach to order, in which people and things are hived off into discrete categories, Esther treats other characters as fluid nodal points in her growing network of associations, which she oversees by, in her own words, “render[ing] what kind services I could, to those immediately about me; and to try to let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself” (117). As a result of her unwillingness to locate her identity within pre-made categories of discernment—or, conversely, her ignorance about those categories—Esther’s relationships with loved ones lack clear lines of delineation: John Jarndyce is by turns her substitute father and possible husband; Lady Dedlock her beloved mother and wayward child; Caddy her friend and protégé: relations that, though occasionally confusing and potentially scandalous, are nonetheless responsive to the needs and desires of those involved. (She is the only other character besides Jo who has more than one name, being known affectionately as “Dame Durden,” “Old Woman” and “Mother Hubbard” by the men of Bleak House.)

In the novel, access to discrete domains is symbolized by keys. Tulkinghorn, whose self-imposed duty is protecting the interests of the upper classes, is initially described as possessing an office where “everything that can have a lock has got one; no key is visible” (146). Tulkinghorn locks down Esther’s “iron barriers,” ensuring not only that his clients are insulated
from contact with undesirables, but that they are also from the consequences of their own border-crossing activities. For Bucket, in contrast, keys represent his fog-like access to every nook and cranny of London. As the narrator asserts, “Mr. Bucket pervades a vast number of houses and strolls about an infinity of streets,” and while he does not require keys to enter the slums of Tom-all-alone’s, he “caus[es] himself to be provided with a key” (744) to both Tulkinghorn and Sir Leicester’s residencies. Similarly, when Bucket does lock doors, he tends to lock himself inside, an action that usually signals that the detective is about to overstep a pre-existing social boundary. For instance, Bucket locks himself and Sir Leicester inside Chesney Wold’s library before revealing details about Lady Dedlock’s past, which the propriety-obsessed nobleman might otherwise refuse to hear. Similarly, he locks himself into the missing Lady Dedlock’s boudoir, preventing anyone in the household from protesting against his scrutinizing of her intimate possessions. Finally, when Bucket visits Bleak House for the first time in search of Esther, he “shut[s] the door, and stands with his hand upon the lock” (797) before introducing himself to the beleaguered John Jarndyce. When Jarndyce requests that Bucket remain at the door while he speaks to Esther, “Mr. Bucket says he will, but acting on his usual principle, does no such thing, following upstairs instead and keeping his man in sight” (798). When a key isn’t handy, his methods border on the criminal, such as when he trespasses on Jarndyce’s property in order to secretly apprehend Jo, or when he locates Gridley by spying through Sir George’s skylight. In addition to using his gift for classification in ways that often efface nuance and complexity, Bucket, like the detectives of Household Words, must paradoxically inhabit the “middle kingdom” of doors, windows, and other threshold spaces in order to bolster taxonomic clarity.

_Bleak House_ also exposes the consequences of Bucket’s “obliteration of landmarks,” as previously unconnected domains begin to crash into one another as a result of Bucket’s
activities. Under his manipulations, the unscrupulous moneylender Smallweed is permitted to both literally and figuratively spill through Sir Leicester’s door and threaten his reputation—a direct encounter that Bucket admits Tulkinghorn would never have allowed had he still been alive. Bucket does so because his mandate is not to protect Sir Leicester from contact with “undesirables,” but to expose and apprehend Tulkinghorn’s murderer by any means necessary. As D. A. Miller notes, the “dangerous efficacy” of Bucket’s detection is mirrored in the activities of “amateur” detectives in the text, like Guppy and Mrs. Snagsby. Even though they fail in their investigations, their activities nevertheless “pose[s] a threat to … social and institutional orders.” As a result of both characters’ prying into “unsavoury sexual secrets,” the boundaries between public and private realms seem to be rendered “ultimately archaic” (72). For Bucket, physical boundaries can be as easily dispensed with as social ones. He re-enacts the presumptuous arrogance of Mrs. Pardiggle, who gives herself licence to intrude on the houses of the poor in the service of “good works.” As they did with Pardiggle, the brickmakers openly protest against Bucket’s lack of decorum when he invites himself and Esther Summerson into their hovel: “I’m not partial to gentlefolks coming into my place,” says one of them. “I let their places be, and it’s curious they can't let my place be” (812). Though Bucket’s “mixing” of otherwise disparate groups of people allows him to fulfill his duty and solve Bleak House’s mysteries, it also foments class resentment and distrust.

In contrast, Esther Summerson is frequently gifted with keys as a symbol of the love and trust other characters bestow on her. She recognizes the privilege, and is deeply gratified that she is put in charge of Bleak House’s housekeeping keys, and that she will be given keys to Ada and Richard’s abode once they are married. Esther in turn uses keys to forge social connections: when given the key to the flat in which the debt collector Neckett’s orphaned children are confined, for instance, she and John Jarndyce welcome the oldest child Charley into their home
while providing new homes for the younger ones. From a Latourian perspective, by permitting hybridity to exist, Esther ensures it does not proliferate to destructive ends. Her goal is not to act like Bucket, charging through the boundaries—a threshold space she describes at one point as an “iron barrier” (122)—that separate people and things into distinct domains, but rather to gain consensual access from those on the other side.

Considering the unpredictable and occasionally chaotic effects of Bucket’s activities, the other characters of *Bleak House* display a demonstrable and near-universal apprehension around his character—a trait that would accompany many other fictional depictions of detectives in the Victorian era. One of the sources of this discomfort is that the detective’s motives—and how powerfully he adheres to them—remain mysterious. As D. A. Miller notes, Bucket’s actions compel the reader to consider: “on behalf of whom or what does the Detective Police do its policing?” (79). While Dickens repeatedly insists in *Household Words* that the detectives’ zeal comes from a place of staunch professionalism, for the first few decades of the force’s existence it was difficult to ascertain whether the new detective force was made up of public servants, private agents for hire, or an ungainly hybrid of both. Shpayer-Makov notes that initially the detectives were “allowed to accept gratuities … in recognition of their services” as this practice was “considered necessary for motivation” (115). Inspector Field, to whom Dickens had dedicated an entire article, compelled London police commissioners to begin delineating clearer boundaries when he retained his famous title and rank—“Inspector Field of the Detective Police”—upon retiring into private surveillance work. As Stephen Wade notes, “it was only too clear that any future working on crimes in which official and private detectives might be at work

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38 In describing Sergeant Cuff from Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*, the servant Betteredge declares that “[t]here is something in that police officer from London which I recoil from” (105). Meanwhile Sherlock Holmes legendarily puts both criminals and law-abiding citizens on edge with his seemingly supernatural powers of deduction. 
39 Even Dickens acknowledges in the first article dealing with the new detective force that they address matters both of public concern and private interest. The narrator notes that they not only “counteract the machinations of every sort of rascal” but also work to “clear up family mysteries, the investigation of which demands the utmost delicacy and tact” (1.16; 368).
simultaneously was not exactly desirable” (58). Similarly, although Bucket repeatedly refers to himself as “Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police,” he is initially introduced in the capacity of a private investigator employed by Tulkinghorn. As such, he pursues Jo and Gridley not as an official of the state but on behalf of the interests of his client. Though Bucket is presented as being familiar with the police and its networks, he is never portrayed as being subject to any organizational oversight. Therefore, his “alignment” changes when his client does: when Bucket takes on the case of Tulkinghorn’s murder, his interests are only coincidentally placed in line with the novel’s protagonists.

Bucket’s lack of discernible motivation, his unclear loyalties (whether he is a public servant or a private agent), and his manipulation of social and spatial boundaries points to the paradox inherent in his mandate of systemic ordering. Though he exists to categorize and classify others, *Bleak House* imparts the pervasive sense that Bucket’s effects on the world are unpredictable and frequently disruptive. Bucket’s threatening instability of character is evident in other characters’ assessments of him. Volumnia Dedlock describes Bucket as a “perfect Blue Chamber” (750), referring to the mysterious locked room in the Legend of Bluebeard, thus connoting “a man of frightening mystery” (940). Meanwhile, Sir George deems him a “rum customer” (667): slang for “an odd, dubious, or suspect person” (“rum”). Even his name—based on an object used to separate and contain other things—also suggests hidden profundities, in evidence when Mrs. Bagnet refers to him as being “deep” (740).

Much like the detectives in *Household Words*, in addition to being a master of disguise, Bucket evinces a tendency to take on the characteristics of those around him, which is further evidence of the fluidity of the detective as an entity. Recalling Dickens’s tendency to create names that befit the character, the inside of a bucket takes the shape of its container—in a sense, Bucket fills himself with whatever fits his outward “shape.” When working for Tulkinghorn,
Bucket mirrors his client’s relentlessness and amorality, whereas in the Dedlock’s house he begins to take on the affectations of the nobility, requesting a snuff-box and a “toothful of your fine old brown East Inder sherry” (745), while seeming to be unduly preoccupied with maintaining the Dedlock family reputation. More explicitly, when he enters into Lady Dedlock’s boudoir he begins imagining himself as a member of the upper classes. While opening and shutting table-drawers and looking into caskets and jewel-cases, he sees the reflection of himself in various mirrors and is momentarily lost in a daydream: “one might suppose I was a-moving in the fashionable circles and getting myself up for Almack’s,” he muses (795). Revealingly, Bucket displays self-consciousness about the stability of his own identity, repeatedly insisting that other characters “know” him as Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police. “Now you know me, don’t you?” he twice inquires to Esther during their search for Lady Dedlock. “What could I say but yes?” (819) she comments. As Ousby notes, Esther is “forced to commit herself only out of social politeness” (101).

Methods aside, the novel’s conclusion ultimately leads to questions about the efficacy of Bucket’s work. Although he successfully locates Lady Dedlock, Bucket comes too late to prevent her lonely and isolated death. Similarly, though his recovery of the final Jarndyce will finally allows the interminable case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce to conclude, none of the characters involved benefit. Richard, whose life became vampirically attached to the case, perishes with it upon realizing that the inheritance he won has been swallowed up in costs. Furthermore, Bucket’s revelation about Lady Dedlock’s past—and the dramatic, relentless manner in which he communicates it to her husband—is directly responsible for Sir Leicester’s stroke, which leaves him crippled and unable to speak (once again, Bucket fails to pick up on another character’s obvious signs of medical distress). The quest for purification and certainty,
the narrative suggests, not only creates instances of social chaos, but also forces vulnerable people into oppressive categories of being.\footnote{Lady Dedlock’s death is partly the result of Sir Leicester and Tulkinghorn’s insistence on categorical purity: as a noblewoman, Lady Dedlock must eradicate the unacceptable social circulations and collusions of her past or have her present categorization as a noblewoman eradicated. Lady Dedlock thus finds herself cut off from feelings of love or friendship as an unfortunate consequence.}

Presented in counterpoint to Bucket’s actions is the novel’s protagonist and co-narrator Esther Summerson, the only character in Bleak House who accepts and even embraces her lack of stable identity. She accepts her lot as an obscure orphan and adapts herself to the needs of the individuals and groups surrounding her, thus forging “delicate webs” (Latour 39) of people, places, and things that span across many spaces and social classes. As Audrey Jaffe argues in Vanishing Points, Esther’s self-effacements are a survival strategy, allowing her to forge her selfhood based on the “gazes of others” (134) rather than on more institutionalized forms of identity. In light of her desire not to be constituted by categories, the striking equanimity with which Esther accepts her disfigurement by disease must be understood in terms of a world that believes “physiognomy is identity”—a conviction uttered by one of Dickens’s other pseudo-detective characters.\footnote{The character is Mr. Sampson, Chief Manager of a Life Assurance Office from the short story “Hunted Down” (1859), who assists in tracking down the villainous Mr. Slinkett, a fictional version of the real-life poisoner Thomas Wainwright (Ackroyd 865).} Esther’s physical transformation removes the one aspect of her identity that she could not control: her physical likeness to her mother. As the bastard of nobility, both above and below the station of her loved ones, Esther exists in a kind of social non-space. As Gordon Hirsch points out, if her identity were easily apprehended she could not “so easily escape the consequences of the sins of her parents” (137). As a result of her literal defacement by disease, she ironically succeeds “in constructing a world that reflects only the self she wishes to see” (Jaffe 137). But even in this instance Dickens allows Bucket to get the classificatory upper hand, as the detective quickly establishes the connection between mother and daughter not
through physical similarity, but through misplaced property: Esther’s conspicuously homely handkerchief residing amidst Lady Dedlock’s luxurious jewellery.

Esther’s apparent acceptance of the inevitable fluidities of social and geographic identifiers does not mean she is an undiscerning agent of chaos like Krook or Mrs. Jellyby; on the contrary, she is chosen as housekeeper of Bleak House because of her “need for order, as well as her observant eye for household detail” (Bodenheimer 147). In fact, Esther’s fever dreams reveal much about her desire to maintain a benevolent but still present “ordering hand” over the construction of a pliable but still extant identity. During Esther’s prolonged illness, she is “distressed exceedingly” (513) by her world’s apparent loss of clear boundaries, as divisions of time between childhood, adolescence, and youth become irreconcilably confused with one another. Additionally, her dream of being a bead within “a flaming necklace” can be interpreted as a horror of losing her autonomy: of being forced into a proscribed role from which there is no escape. Esther recollects her nightmare with revulsion: “it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be part of a dreadful thing” (514). Esther’s mode of being in the world is strikingly similar to what Latour recommends for correcting the problems associated with the modern ethos: by eschewing strict categories, she establishes more stable, lasting order. In the final chapter of *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour recommends that we embrace “morphism”: recognizing that humans do not “possess a stable form,” but that we are “not formless for all that” (157). Latour argues that we must pay attention to and appreciate the complexities of networks and “imbroglios,” and consider the effects of new innovations, technologies, and organizations on those networks before unleashing them on the world. To put it another way, the productive and ameliorating cross-class encounters that Esther Summerson assembles—which arise from a reluctance to assign herself or others to a pre-formed identity—are in stark contrast to the social chaos and distress caused by Bucket’s mandate of purification.
Esther’s relationship with Bleak House itself provides a synecdoche of Latour’s alternative “Nonmodern Constitution.” As Bodenheimer notes, “the layout of Bleak House evades interpretation,” defying “straight lines and architecturally plausible floor levels” (149). Instead of shrinking from its spatial confusions, however, Esther finds the house “delightfully irregular” in its “bountiful provision of little halls and passages” (78) and is enchanted by its strange assemblage of bird-cages, “Hindoo” chairs, bamboo skeletons, and rooms that are “part library, part sitting-room, part bed-room, and seemed indeed a comfortable compound of many rooms” (79). Unlike Krook’s shop or Mrs. Jellyby’s home, Bleak House evades chaos through its “perfect neatness” (79), Esther praising its “perfect order of the household and its organized system of drawers” (Bodenheimer 149). Esther also proves herself to be Bleak House’s ideal housekeeper, allowing people and things to retain their waywardness while helping them circulate productively. For her pains she is provided with the only genuine compliment Bucket bestows to anyone in the story, stating “You’re a pattern, you know, that’s what you are” (834). In calling Esther a “pattern,” Bucket adopts a more obscure definition of the term, used with respect to sewing patterns: she is “an example or model to be imitated”; a “person who or thing which is worthy of copying; an exemplar” (“pattern”). Instead of stamping Esther with a pre-existing category of being, Bucket suggests that she should function as a new and originary model for others.

Conclusion

Although his work is vital in bringing order to the excessive confusions and profusions of entities in Bleak House, Inspector Bucket of the Detective Police turns out to be an anomaly within Dickens’s novels. Though Ian Ousby argues that Dickens “produced a memorable portrait of the new breed of police officer, showing how he might usefully be deployed amid the familiar plot motifs of the Victorian novel” (112), it was a figure that Dickens seldom drew on again in
his fiction. His disengagement with the Detective Police is also evident in his magazine *Household Words*, which, after its intense preoccupation in the early 1850s, rarely focused on them or the police in general thereafter. Though the detective would become one of the most familiar literary archetypes of the age, Dickens would not depict a full-fledged detective in his novels again until (perhaps) his final, unfinished work of fiction, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, though the strong possibility that the character Dick Datchery is a detective in disguise will likely never be confirmed or refuted.

There are a few theories in circulation about what caused Dickens’s disenchantment with detectives. Kate Summerscale argues that Dickens “lost faith in the detectives’ powers of deduction” (190) after the controversy surrounding the infamous “Road Hill House” case concerning the murder of a young boy. Sergeant Whicher believed the perpetrators were the boy’s siblings, Constance and William Kent, but without solid evidence his case was discredited. Numerous letters show that Dickens vociferously disagreed with Whicher’s account, stating at one point that “not all the Detective Police in existence shall ever persuade me out of the hypothesis that circumstances have gradually shaped onto my mind” (207). Summerscale suggests that *Edwin Drood*, which features “a brother and a sister that recall Constance and William Kent” (272) is Dickens’s “revisiting” of the case once Constance confessed to the crime years later and exonerated Whicher’s name. Bodenheimer, meanwhile, suggests more simply that his disenchantment reflected “Dickens’s propensity to embrace the new with unabated enthusiasm and turn savage at the first sign of disappointment” (27).

Based on the analysis performed in this chapter, I maintain that Dickens’s disengagement came less from interpersonal reasons than from ideological ones. Namely, Dickens had experimented with the “detective” as an agent of purification and found its approach too

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43 In a letter to Wilkie Collins, Dickens theorizes that the boy’s father and the nursemaid strangled the boy (Summerscale 190).
inhumane and its effects potentially too disruptive to endorse. His subsequent novels continually return to the predicament of existing in a universe filled with the superfluous, obsolete, indecipherable, and useless, such as in *Hard Times*, *Great Expectations*, and most obviously, *Our Mutual Friend*, but a clear and easy “solution” to the complexities of modern existence is no longer sought. *Our Mutual Friend* especially is concerned with the impossibility of homogenous, linear narratives, as it depicts a London of social flux, “weirdly animated objects” (Cotsell xiv), and constantly shifting significations. In fact, in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens seems to ultimately embrace the fractured world of fluid and indefinable ontology that troubled him in *Bleak House*, depicting a social world where the happiest characters are those who, like Esther, occasionally abandon the self to “void, unconsciousness, connection, mutuality, spirit” (xvi). As the character Mortimer Lightwood concludes in the final chapter of *Our Mutual Friend*, there is no one correct and unified “Voice of Society” who possesses the authority or ability to stabilize the many hybridized, protean entities that make up nineteenth-century London, and perhaps the metropolis is better for it.
Red Rooms, Yellow Wallpapers, and “Thinged” Women: Gothic Tropes and the Struggle for Subjectivity in the Victorian Home

“Ainsi donc, être, c’est avoir.”
—Georges Gusdorf 44

In Henry Morley’s satirical “House Full of Horrors,” published in Dickens’s *Household Words* in 1852, the hapless protagonist, Mr. Crumpet, finds his once-beloved bourgeois home “haunted by the most horrid shapes” (265).45 Hideous forms “glare at [him]” in his hallways; his dressing gown and slippers “torture” him: “I am a haunted man,” he moans, “molested in my peace by horrid sights” (266). The source of his home’s animate grotesques is not a malevolent spirit or a family curse; rather they appear after Crumpet has his “eyes opened” during a visit to the newly established Department of Practical Art. The museum was designed to instruct visitors on the principles of sound interior design. It also included “a collection of specially chosen objects intended to humiliate inept consumers and duplicitous manufactures” (Diaz-Griffith) presented under the heading “Instances of Bad Taste,” which became popularly known as “The Chamber of Horrors.”

The story, which ridicules the idea that objects specifically designed to provide comfort could ever terrify or repel, follows a trajectory similar to that found in *Jane Eyre*, which had been published only five years previously to widespread acclaim. In the 1847 novel’s famous “red room” scene, the protagonist perceives signs of menace from her home that other members of the household do not notice. Mr. Crumpet echoes this hostile sensation in “The Chamber of Horrors.” The sense of peril experienced separately by both Mr. Crumpet and Jane Eyre is conveyed through tropes appropriated from gothic romances. In each case, the relationship of the

45 The readership of *Household Words* was intended to be “the affluent middle class” and working-class readers interested in “trading up” (Drew 292)—exactly the same class whose excesses the design reformers were attempting to tame.
protagonist to their domestic realm recalls that of a persecuted heroine confined within a haunted castle (which, in Crumpet’s case, involves a burlesque gender inversion). Morley’s short story also mimics one of the more memorable moments of *Jane Eyre*, going so far as to recreate Brontë’s use of Jane’s traumatic “species of fit” when Mr. Crumpet experiences a state of “mental apoplexy” after discovering an illustration of a butterfly at the bottom of his teacup. By summoning this iconic scene, Morley’s “House of Horrors” not only lampoons the often hypercritical rhetoric of design reformers, but also mocks Brontë’s “terrifyingly ambiguous” depictions of domestic life, which challenged the Victorian ideal of the home as a place of peace, safety, and protection (Warwick “Victorian Gothic” 30). And yet, the idea of people—particularly feminized people—being overtaken by the *bric-à-brac* within their own homes had existed before Brontë’s ill-omened red room, and it persisted throughout the century. When the artist George Cattermole illustrated *The Old Curiosity Shop*’s Nell slumbering amidst a looming,

Figure 2: “I had ever before me the old dark murky rooms—the gaunt suits of mail with their ghostly silent air—the faces all awry, grinning from wood and stone—the dust and rust and worm that lives in wood—and alone in the midst of all this lumber and decay and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber, smiling through her light and sunny dreams.”
ogling assortment of second-hand furniture (see Fig. 2), he likely drew from Dickens’s own description of the “ghostly silent air” of the shop’s inventory, with “faces all awry, grinning from wood or stone” (22).

Since Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s seminal Madwoman in the Attic (1979), critics have argued that the use of gothic motifs with respect to everyday domestic scenes is meant to amplify female characters’ feelings of powerlessness within the conventions of nineteenth-century realism. In other words, nineteenth-century novelists adapted the eighteenth-century gothic heroine’s imperiled response to being trapped inside a crypt, dungeon, or castle into contemporary settings in order to emphasize modern women’s “ambivalent experience of entrapment and longing for protection (Davison “Haunted House” 53). Historically, critics have understood the source of these novels’ attenuated depictions of peril within the domestic realm as arising from the thoughts and feelings of the character herself. The character’s environment therefore acts as a “type of phantasmagoria screen onto which is projected [the protagonist’s] sense of her situation” (60). Any implied malevolence on the part of a given house, room, or object is understood to be rhetorical. After all, this line of reasoning implies, Jane Eyre’s red room is not actually a gothic dungeon. The text makes clear that for all the psychic distress Jane experiences within it, the red room remains a rarely used and ostensibly lifeless spare bedroom in a bourgeois household.

Such an interpretation of nineteenth-century domestic fiction’s adaptation of the gothic, I argue, downplays the culture’s territorial understanding of subject-object relations, which tended

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to treat property as correlative to its owner. Susan Stewart argues that in the modern era, the acquisition and arrangement of objects in the home’s interior creates a fantasy of self-fashioning, in which “the self is invited to expand within the confines of the bourgeois domestic space” (157). This was particularly true of the Victorian era. As Deborah Cohen notes, “[e]ndowed with moral and artistic qualities, possessions—or so the Victorians came to believe—made the man (x). Much of the impetus behind the mania for decorating, therefore, was an attempt to physically manifest identity through the acquisition of objects within an interior, arranging them in a “magic circle” (Benjamin Arcades 207) of personal significance.

If the logic of Victorian possessions as extensions of one’s concepts of self holds, one must consider the potential effects on individuals forced to spend the majority of life in a space designed to incarnate another individual’s identity. In an era committed to the concept of subjectivity as a privilege earned through bestowing an “ordering hand” over other entities, middle-class Victorian women in particular were at risk of being colonized: of being reduced to supplements of, or extensions to, their husband’s or male relative’s personality. In numerous literary portrayals, possessions often appear to contribute to the effacement of a character’s autonomy, particularly if the master of the house possesses a domineering personality.47

The malevolent, engulfing objects that terrorize certain characters—the hideous wallpapers, menacing four-poster beds, and glaring lamps—are therefore an example of one of the more unusual consequences of Victorian thing culture. Namely, they literalize the era’s belief in the “mutual construction of persons and their built environment” (Watson 147), functioning not simply as reflections of their owner’s tastes but also as extensions of their selfhood—witch-like “familiars” that assist in their master’s metaphysical colonization of the home. One of the

47 It was this aspect of the relationship of owner to home that Victorians imported from gothic romance novels. As Eugenia DeLamotte writes, the architecture in those texts is often homologous to its “dominant human occupant.” The building thus “contains a specifically threatening personality while in its atmosphere embodying a vaster, vaguer threat” (Perils 16).
many ironies of Morley’s short story is that Mr. Crumpet is threatened by what are ostensibly extensions of his own selfhood: possessions with which he had previously enjoyed a pleasing symbiosis.\textsuperscript{48}

In most variations of the “gothic interior” trope (as I’m calling it), individuals that feel oppressed within the domestic realm are frequently portrayed as suffering from psychic derangement. As noted above, “House Full of Horrors” hyperbolizes the psychological effects of the furniture inside Jane Eyre’s red room, to the point where Crumpet works himself into a state of frenzy that climaxes with him shrieking in terror at a friends’ unfashionable china. On the one hand, women’s dissatisfaction with their circumscribed roles as “angels in the house” was, as discussed below, frequently likened to the restrictions suffered by so-called lunatics committed to public asylums. On the other hand, critics of the design reform movement often portrayed individuals who were overly concerned with home design as being themselves mentally unstable—or more precisely, as taking on the attributes of a gothic heroine: effeminate and easily overwhelmed. The pervasive association of discomfort in the home with mental derangement exposes the nineteenth century’s assumptions regarding individuals who appeared to be “out-of-

\textsuperscript{48} Mr. Crumpet describes his relationship to his home previous to his visit to the Department of Practical Art: “When we shut out the twilight and I lighted the camphene—which I always do myself in order to prevent what I used to call a Rising of the Blacks, I seemed to shut out care, to lighten up my heart as well as my small parlour. When … I sat down in my large easy chair, I seemed to have put on inside as well as outside comfort and ease, and to find rest for my thoughts as well as for my body” (141).
sync” with their built interiors. But more pressingly, cultural preoccupations with domestic spaces that were somehow *unheimlich* reveal the semiotic ambiguities embedded in the structures of the nineteenth-century home, where the hallmarks of confinement and protection were at times indistinguishable. Insanity, particularly in the case of domestic novels, becomes a sublimated means of acknowledging the duality of the interior’s significations. In other words, what all variations of the “gothic interior” trope acknowledge—however elliptically, as in the case of Punch’s “Aesthetics” caricature (Fig. 3)—is that the nineteenth-century domestic realm, as it was designed and constructed, served to support competitive forms of self-actualization that often came at the expense of other members of the household.

As I discuss below, the semiotics of sovereignty were evident in Victorian design trends, which tended to throw together furniture inspired by the distant past alongside ornamentation from exotic locales—a “masquerade of styles” that enacted both spatial and temporal mastery over the world of things. But, as Benjamin notes, the legendarily cluttered, eclectic design of the nineteenth century also ensured that “relations of dominance … became obscured” (*Arcades* 218). The paradoxes inherent in the space compelled those concerned with home décor to continually suggest that feelings of oppression were only created by “bad” design, and even then
the association was intended to be hyperbolic. In women’s domestic fiction, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” however, the sense of peril the heroines feel from their surroundings brings these culturally sublimated relationships of dominance into the foreground, demonstrating how people who are already excised from social, legal, political, and economic forms of autonomy struggle to individuate within spaces designed to undermine that process even further. In both cases, the heroines’ selfhood is under threat of being absorbed into its surroundings.

**Idealizing the Victorian Home**

Jane Eyre’s misery in Gateshead causes great consternation for Mr. Lloyd, the well-meaning apothecary who tends to her after she breaks down in the red room. Demurring about the cruelty the Reeds have inflicted upon Jane, Mr. Lloyd focuses on the great privilege of living in such a “beautiful house,” exclaiming in disbelief: “You can’t be silly enough to leave such a splendid place?” (20). Lloyd’s assumption that the grandeur of her living space should more than atone for any casual cruelties Jane might endure within it is consistent with contemporary benedictions about home as central to the Victorian psyche. As nineteenth-century architect Ernest Newton exclaimed, “the belief in the sacredness of home-life is still left to us, and it is itself a religion, pure and easy to believe” (qtd. in Briggs *Victorian Things* 214). The home was also conceived of as a space critical to identity formation, particularly for children. In Walter Pater’s “Imaginary Portraits,” the narrator expounds on the “gradual expansion” of his soul inside his childhood home, noting that “material objects” are “so large an element in children’s lives” that they “actually become a part; inward and outward being woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture” (313). Even Jane balks at the possibility of leaving Gateshead for good. When Mr. Lloyd asks if she would prefer to live with her impoverished relations, Jane immediately envisions a life bereft of domestic privacy and comfort, picturing
poor women “nursing their children or washing clothes at the cottage doors of the village.” She concludes: “I could not see how poor people had the means of being kind” (20). For young Jane, the lack of a proper bourgeois home, bereft of privacy and comfort, is linked to a lack of an ability to cultivate individuality.

If the home was central to the Victorian development of selfhood, then the woman’s place within it was similarly fundamental. Middle-class women, who before the industrial revolution had helped their husbands with their work as shopkeepers, farmers, or piece workers, were, as Flanders notes, now “physically separated from their husband’s labour and became solely housekeepers” (xxii). This singular role of housekeeper was overlaid with contemporary ideals of feminine comfort and warmth. In “Of Queens’ Gardens,” Ruskin articulates the ideal of female subjectivity as inseparable from domesticity. It is the duty of men, he explains, to protect women by insulating them within the home: “The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial. … But he guards the woman from all of this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offence” (para. 68; my emphasis). Ruskin’s construction of the relationship between husband, wife, and house relies on a paradox. The husband, who possesses the house and guards the woman, is the sovereign subject who acts upon other entities. But the syntax of “within his house, as ruled by her” places “house” and “her” on the same metaphysical level. The act of ruling over it is attributed to the wife (“by her”) but she is simultaneously positioned as an object within the sentence. The question of the husband’s ownership over the wife is similarly equivocal: the wife is not “his,” yet she dwells “within his house.” Ruskin acknowledges that women are free to leave the home (“unless herself has sought it”—again, the reflexive pronoun curtails any sense of external action), but emphasizes the consequences: danger, error, temptation, offence. Ruskin’s ambiguity about the power women wield in the home is also
evident. He insists that a “woman’s power is for rule” but limits the scope of that rule: “her intellect is not for invention or creation, but sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision” (para. 68). The man creates: the woman appreciates. The woman may rule a household, but it is a household created by the man, and she is confined within it.

Though the image of the Victorian wife regally visiting shops with husband meekly in tow (usually burdened with carrying her many purchases) was a popular symbol of the dangers of female shopping in the era (see Fig. 4), as Deborah Cohen’s work in Household Gods shows, “the Victorian interior was neither chiefly the responsibility, nor even the prerogative of women.” Cohen notes that “until at least the 1880s, the business of furnishing was almost entirely a man’s world” (89-90). Even if she were to have an interest in decorating her home, a Victorian wife’s ability to do so rested entirely on the permission—and money—of her husband. As Anthony Wohl notes in The Victorian Family, the Victorian patriarch, “like an emperor … delegated, amply and freely, much of his power, but he could always recall it” (62).49

49 The Victorian paterfamilias was not simply a cultural ideal: male domination was inscribed into the nation’s laws. Until the Married Women’s Property Act in 1882, an English woman ceased to be a separate legal entity once she
There were sporadic acknowledgements that women confined to the domestic realm were rendered psychically vulnerable by their isolation and dependency. Campaigners for women’s property rights compared the “deprivation of legal and economic liberties endured by the married woman” (Wise xix) to the loss of civil liberties suffered by the lunatic. Asylum life, a modern-day version of the oppressive institutional architecture found in gothic romances, was used to emphasize the patriarchal structures that restricted women’s freedoms in the home. But the comparison of married women to asylum inmates was not far from the truth. The ease with which one could commit a woman for lunacy (two medical certificates were required for the diagnosis [Wise xxi]) allowed for, in the words of contemporary author Charles Reade, the “disposing of inconvenient wives” (quoted in Blaine 212). In one infamous example, Edward Bulwer Lytton, one of the most renowned writers of his day, had his estranged wife Rosina incarcerated in a private hospital after she publicly denounced him for his miserly living allowance. But Victorian husbands had no need to rely on asylums. As Blandford and Hamilton note in the 1886 text Insanity and its Treatment, “[i]n the well-to-do classes … so many females are kept at home that the male populations of the asylums predominate” (99). Wives and daughters could lawfully be imprisoned within their own homes under justification of insanity, because “no certificate was required if a patient was to be confined in his/her own home” (Wise 387). As one contemporary reviewer noted, Brontë’s depiction of Bertha Mason’s confinement was far from an “exaggeration of reality” (Chorley 1101). Daniel Pool notes that until 1891, if a

married: any property or wages became her husband’s. She could not enter into contracts. Even her body was controlled by her husband, both sexually and under habeas corpus, which required a wife to remain in her husband’s home unless persistent and extreme violence could be proven.

50 Sarah Wise argues that the motif of the wrongfully incarcerated wife became so powerful in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that it obscured the reality that, in the Victorian period, men were just as likely to be wrongfully incarcerated for lunacy as women: “There was nothing in the law to prevent a wife putting away her husband, or a mother having her son confined, and plenty of women disposed of their menfolk in this way” (xix). She notes in a later podcast on her research: “it is the women’s stories that have endured, and today they are giving us a rather skewed view of the subject.”
husband wished to confine his wife against her will, “he was well within his rights in doing so” (184).

As many critics have observed, literary genres like detective stories and sensation fiction emerged from cultural anxieties over what might be going on “behind the curtains”: within the presumed hermetic seal of the home. When Watson enthuses about the pretty farmsteads he observes from the train in the early Sherlock Holmes adventure, “The Copper Beeches”—about a young woman isolated in her strange employer’s manor house—Holmes responds ominously that the sight of such homesteads fills him with a cold dread: “Think of the hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser” (Conan Doyle 278). Holmes’s wariness about the home contrasts with Northanger Abbey’s Henry Tilney, who is appalled by Catherine’s implication that his father has trapped his mother within the ruins of their country estate. Written one hundred years before Holmes’s adventures, Tilney treats the notion that such “atrocities” could be committed in the modern world “where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open” (Austen 196) as ridiculous on its face. For Tilney, the modern world, by very definition, cannot contain the “gothic.” As I outline in the next section, the dramatic change in attitude towards the home evident in these two texts owes as much to shifting mores in living habits and interior design as it does to generic convention.

Gothic Design in the Nineteenth-Century Interior

Ruskin’s equivocal vision of the distribution of power within the home provides an ominous perspective on the purposes behind the “unusually cossetted” rooms that typified

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nineteenth-century living (J. Brown Bourgeois Interior 61). The pronounced bifurcation of private and public spaces and the attendant sanctification of the home in the Victorian era developed alongside a notable shift in home design and décor. The “glittering, coldly magnificent rooms” of the eighteenth century (Lukacs 626), with their large windows and sparsely furnished expanses, gave way in the Victorian era to smaller, darker, heavily draped and cluttered spaces intended for specialized purposes and people. As Benjamin writes in The Arcades Project, the private interior reaches its “most extreme form,” in the nineteenth century, and he likens the relationship of an individual and his home to an invertebrate in its shell, in which “the shell bears the impression of its occupant” (220-21). Benjamin’s creature analogies emphasize the concept of the home as a created space, manufactured to form physical boundaries around the self. No wonder then, that sensation novels like The Moonstone and Lady Audley’s Secret depict the home as a homeostatic sanctum that is irrevocably corrupted by the entry of malignant outsiders (be they person or thing).

In Victorian Glassworlds, Isobel Armstrong echoes Benjamin’s convictions about the homologous construction of home and identity, and the cultural notion that both needed to be protected from intrusion. She notes that the Victorian habit of concealing windows under layers of lace and heavy drapery speaks to the culture’s attendant withdrawal into individual ownership, isolation, and concealment: “the isolated figure at the window, an endemic image of nineteenth-century iconography, gazes from a hidden interior” (7). It is not only the building structure or room configuration that presents a sense of barricading the dwelling, however. As varied and heterogeneous as Victorian design could be, one of its dominant themes is fortification, with an enthusiasm for furniture designs that “bristl[ed] with battlements” (Benjamin Arcades 212), becoming increasingly “immense, fantastic, strange, [and] armed with locks and secrets” (225) as the century wore on. Even the vogue for placing furniture at angles contained “the
unconscious retention of a posture of struggle and defense” (215) as the inhabitants safeguarded their interiors from the outside world.

Once barriers were put in place, the occupant was free to fill the space with material manifestations of his personality. In his seminal work, *Victorian Things* (1989), Asa Briggs notes that from its Spartan beginnings at the beginning of the century, the Victorian home became more and more a repository for objects. This dramatic “increase in the number of things in the home” (220) was fostered by the era’s nascent consumer culture, but much of its impetus was also a result of the desire to display subject sovereignty—what I’m calling the mode of thinking about individuality that contributed to the Victorian cultural shift towards the “world of things.” Out of individuals’ sense of dependency on their possessions comes a rarely expressed but still detectable anxiety over objects “gradually tak[ing] possession of the residence” (*Arcades* 218). But as gothic-inflected domestic novels reveal, equally terrifying is the possibility that these objects, animated by the mystifications of commodity culture but still subservient to their possessor’s scheme of classification, would fulfill their intended purpose, functioning as objective correlatives of their owner’s personality. If objects in the home function as physical extensions of their owner, other occupants may thus begin to feel their own subjectivities becoming influenced in the process.

Many of the most famous Victorian novels portray the struggle for autonomous individuation in domestic life, with women often depicted as being “crowded out” by their husband’s personality via his possessions. Feeling increasingly oppressed by Lowick Manor’s “small-windowed and melancholy-looking” (85) visage, which mirrors her husband’s dismal personality, *Middlemarch’s* Dorothea spends the majority of her private time in a faded blue room that seems haunted by its previous female tenants, implying generations of Casaubon women’s spatial marginalization. More foreboding, in the American context, is the enclosure of
Isabel Archer (*Portrait of a Lady*) in Gilbert Osmond’s “house of darkness … house of dumbness … house of suffocation,” in which “Osmond’s beautiful mind … seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her” (396). Her cousin Ralph reflects on Isabel’s condition and sadly concludes: “What did Isabel represent? … she represented Gilbert Osmond” (363). Benjamin notes that if one enters a bourgeois room of the 1880s, “for all the coziness it radiates, the strongest impression you receive may well be ‘You’ve got no business here’” (*Selected Writings* 2:734): in such a self-reifying domain, all other entities are interlopers unless they assimilate into the space itself. Such is the plight of Isabel specifically and of Victorian women generally.

Instead of addressing the broader cultural inequalities that fostered the domestic realm’s claustrophobic atmosphere, design reformers sought to treat symptoms of inequality by exorcizing “bad” objects from the home. Aided by parliamentary committees and government-appointed schools of design, reformers such as Henry Cole and Owen Jones constructed formal guidelines that directly conflated design with morality: sound design was clear and measured; bad design was confusing and excessive. Economically, there was ample reason for the culture to take seriously the criticisms of the self-appointed design experts, as the poor quality of British design was already sparking fears of falling behind France, Germany, and the United States in the export of manufactured goods (“Wallpaper Design Reform”). Attempts to curb the “unprecedented eclecticism … [and] proliferation of styles” of the era, then, was also partly an attempt to rein in the “prosperous, self-confident middle-class, for whom such exuberance and abundance represented comfort, both physical and financial.”

For all the class snobbery evident in their condemnations, Cole and his fellow reformers “sincerely believed that meretricious designs corrupted the body politic” (Cohen 20). As Christine Bolus-Reichert argues, aesthetic eclecticism was widely regarded as a symptom of a
“lack of progress in the arts,” indicating a culture incapable of inspiration or originality and inclined to egotistical indulgence (42). After visiting Walter Scott’s Abbotsford, an expansive mansion designed to mimic a medieval castle, Ruskin called the author’s ceaseless additions and expansions to the estate a “destructive vice”: “[a]n air of compulsiveness hangs about the place with no sign of discrimination” (Works 1:17). From Scott’s Abbotsford Ruskin diagnoses his nation’s “lingering crisis of identity” and its symptom of cluttered, eclectic décor.

Other criticism shows a concern for the psychological effects of living within “unwholesome” environments for prolonged periods, particularly if an individual was already inclined to psychological instabilities. Of particular concern to the reformers were objects that combined incongruous shapes and forms, such as substances made to look like finer materials (cotton made to mimic silk, for example), realistic imitations of natural objects like plants and animals, and the “undisciplined” abundance of different colours, patterns, and designs within a single space. As Armstrong argues, these “hybrid, miscegenated objects” (Glassworlds 221) created a “dislocation between things and us” (218), in which boundaries between ontological categories of being become unsettlingly fluid. “Tawdry objects,” the Furniture Gazette warned in 1873, are “doing an amount of real mischief, the extent, nature, and ramifications of which could scarcely be described in a volume” (“Gossiping” 583).

In many ways, the insane wife can be understood as the ultimate “tawdry object”—both as an entity that indicates the possible malevolence of her husband (or male relative) and as a being whose existence disrupts the husband’s enjoyment of his sovereign relationship to his etui: his personalized shell. As angel in the house, the wife’s identity is subsumed into that of her husband; as a madwoman, her insanity eclipses her “higher” functions, yet she retains a threatening singularity that cannot be harmonized within the home. Literary heroines are often “thinged” as a result of their madness even as they remain ensconced within the domestic realm.
For instance, in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester does not institutionalize his mad wife Bertha Mason, or send her back to her family; rather he places her within an isolated attic room in an even more isolated manor house. Lady Audley, meanwhile, in a chapter ominously entitled “Buried Alive,” is committed by her brother-in-law to a French *maison de santé* to be treated with all tenderness and compassion but under no circumstances was she permitted to leave” (394). Save for the severe restrictions put upon her physical mobility—which she had used to such devastating effect in her various schemes—Lady Audley’s incarceration simulates her married life at Audley Court. 

As DeLamotte notes, “women who just can’t seem to get out of the house” (10) are a defining condition of gothic romances, but as the red room scene of *Jane Eyre* reveals, of equal threat was the possibility of the house getting into the women: their subjectivities colonized by the reigning male personality of their space of confinement.

**Subject Formation and *Jane Eyre*’s Red Room**

As noted above, when feminist critics of *Jane Eyre* considered its portrayals of domestic life, they often conceived of the “gothic interior” trope as a means to substantiate the characters’ emotional turmoil. But as Freedgood argues, moving away from projective readings of the novel’s interiors yields fresh interpretive possibilities. Tracing the history of mahogany furniture, one of the more prevalent materials in the room, she uncovers a “sadistic history” of “deforestation, colonization, and implementation of plantation slavery” (32). The mahogany

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52 In *In Lady Audley’s Shadow: Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Victorian Literary Gains*, Saverio Tomaiulo argues that Braddon, who dedicated her novel to Edward Bulwer-Lytton offers Lady Audley’s “living death” as she herself calls it, “as a sort of fictional gift” to the author, providing “an alternative epilogue to his wife’s ‘improper’ behaviour” (13).

53 Past interpretations of the red room as an externalization of Jane’s self: Elaine Showalter identifies the red room as an extension of Jane’s body: “with its deadly and bloody connotations, its Freudian wealth of secret compartments, wardrobes, drawers, and jewel chest” the red room is “a paradigm of female inner space” (*Literature* 114-15). Gilbert and Gubar state that Jane’s description of the room’s coldness and stately furniture perfectly represent Jane’s “vision of the society in which she is trapped, an uneasy and elfin dependent” (340). Mark Kinkead-Weekes claims that the room’s red-and-white colour scheme reflects Jane’s choice “between frozen winteriness and red passion” (81). Similarly, Eugenia DeLamotte interprets the room both as an external image of Jane’s own passionate interior and as an embodiment of “the external world as Jane perceives it” (196). More recently, Michael Klotz argues that “the contents of the rooms in *Jane Eyre* move in flux with Jane’s consciousness, and her fears, hopes, intentions, and regrets often seem embodied in the objects that surround her” (12).
metonymically connects the Reed family with violent oppression (they made their fortune in Madeira, a slave colony), highlighting Jane’s repeated comparisons of herself to a “rebel slave” (Brontë 9). As Freedgood notes, however, Jane herself uses mahogany to decorate her cottage at Moor House, ultimately taking ownership over the very material she once associated with her own subaltern state. Jane’s story thus “emerges as a complex and ambivalent narrative of a particularly disturbing sort of identity construction” (Bizup E27). Jane achieves her subject sovereignty through ownership of a material that is, as Freedgood argues, metonymic of African slaves’ bodies.

In light of Freedgood’s interpretation, Brontë’s female take on the Victorian *Bildungsroman* can be seen to emphasize the dilemma of achieving autonomous selfhood according to Victorian models of “competitive individuation” (38) when one cannot fully “possess” the things and people of the world. Thus in the novel, asserting control over domestic space becomes essential to Jane’s subject-formation, and whenever she is placed in a subordinate relationship within a private home, she risks being colonized by the personality of its owner. Mrs. Reed locks Jane in the red room in an attempt to squash her niece’s sudden demonstration of resistance against Gateshead’s power dynamics, and she tells Jane that she is not permitted to leave the room except “on condition of perfect submission and stillness” (14). Jane herself recognizes how her existence, like a “tawdry object,” clashes with her surroundings, noting that she is:

> a discord in Gateshead Hall … a heterogeneous *thing*, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities; a useless *thing*, incapable of adding to their interest, or adding to their pleasure; a noxious *thing*, cherishing the germs of indignation at their treatment, a contempt of their judgement.

(12; my emphasis)

In the red room’s looking glass, Jane sees an image of her disconcertingly hybridized ontology; she sees “a strange little figure … half fairy, half imp” that is neither a force of active agency in Gateshead nor raw material to be moulded by it. Jane is also well aware that if she could become
a “sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child” she would be better liked by her relations. Nonetheless, she resists joining their ranks. On the contrary, she meditates on their personal faults: Eliza’s selfishness, John’s sadism, Georgiana’s spoiled temper, and her aunt’s haughty aversion. She concludes that “[i]f they did not love me, as little did I love them.”

Jane’s resistance to having her identity moulded by her milieu, particularly by her loathsome housemates, contributes to her sense of peril within the red room, which functions as both an extension of Reed corporeality and an intensification of Reed family domination. The room’s over-padded furniture and luxurious materials function as metonyms of the Reeds’ ample frames and predilection for comfort and indulgence, and like the Reeds themselves, the room’s comfort and gentility mask its oppressive high-handedness. The bed, for instance, is piled with luxurious mattresses and pillows that fail to eclipse its “massive pillars”; to Jane, the bed looks more like “a tabernacle.” As well, its soft, well-cushioned easy-chair looks to Jane like “a pale throne” (11). As Benjamin notes, the nineteenth-century dwelling was imagined as a “receptacle for the person” (Arcades 220); the plush, heavily-upholstered environment was intended to receive the impression of its dweller. Jane’s descriptions of the objects in the red room thus emphasize the absence of their male owner’s body. They also imply an anticipation of his return, with allusions to thrones and tabernacles suggesting the ritual inevitability of their symbiosis. Jane’s vision of her uncle “bending over [her] with strange pity” (13) is suggestive of psychosexual engulfment, bringing to mind Benjamin’s comparison of the bourgeois patriarch’s relationship to his household as a spider in the centre of its web, surrounded by insect bodies sucked dry.54

The often malevolent influence of Jane Eyre’s domestic spaces provides fertile ground for reassessing the fate of Bertha Mason, the original madwoman in the attic. In his depiction of

54 As Andrew Smith and William Hughes write, “the point of the domestic gothic is that it represents a particular manifestation of the uncanny in which the house now becomes, in Freud’s terms, a site of troubled sexual secrets, so that far from guaranteeing safety it becomes a space in which trauma is generated” (4).
their courtship, Rochester gives no sense of Bertha’s subjectivity. She is an alluring package “shown to [him] in parties, splendidly dressed”: a creature that never speaks but nonetheless “lavishly displayed for [his] pleasure her charms and accomplishments” (260). Though Rochester insists that Bertha’s madness is congenital, her insanity is not expressed until she enters his household, a space in which her husband’s “deep antipathy” towards her becomes increasingly difficult for him to repress. Upon marriage, Bertha the glittering mute (she is never given direct dialogue in the novel) morphs into an equally inarticulate, raging grotesque, repeatedly likened by Rochester to an animal or demonic force. Bertha never attains autonomous individuality. Raised by her family to be an object of desire, she becomes a mad “thing” when she fails to adapt to her new environment and, by proxy, to her husband’s personality.55 In comparison, immediately after the red room incident, Jane commits herself to radically articulating her identity against her surroundings, in spite of her aunt’s attempts to further nullify her existence by restricting her to the nursery. When Jane’s aunt declares that she is not worthy of their notice and that her children should not associate with her, the young girl counters: “They are not fit to associate with me” (22). At the cusp of her transfer to Lowood, Jane archly resists having her identity established by Gateshead. She cannot say she is a “‘good’ child to the school’s supervisor, Mr. Brocklehurst, when he arrives to meet his new pupil, but Jane equally bristles at her aunt’s self-serving intimation that she is a liar. Having no raw material from which to form her own identity, young Jane relies on negations: she is not deceitful; she does not love her aunt; she is not of Gateshead.

Given the importance of acting upon the material world to the formation of identity in the novel, Jane is remarkably cagey about whether she has achieved her yearned-for liberty in its final chapter. Instead, she emphasizes her blissful inter-subjectivity with Rochester, stating “I am

55 The fact that she is confined for nearly a decade in spite of her “lucid intervals of days—sometimes weeks” (264) provides an ominous echo of Jane’s owned, “thinged” status in the Reed family, and the necessity of her leaving Gateshead before her imprisonment becomes permanent.
my husband’s life as fully as he is mine” (384). She also stresses her submissive role, loaning to her husband various body parts to ease his convalescence: “I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand.” On the other hand, Freedgood notes that Ferndean’s “uninhabited and unfurnished” rooms are a remarkable deviation from Jane Eyre’s other interiors and argues that it is important for the reader “to notice the benefit of unfurnished space in this novel,” which “invites the exercise of habitation as a demonstration of power” (Ideas 33). However, Jane provides no details about the furniture arrangements or choices in décor that might shed light on the new domestic order in the grimly isolated Ferndean. Instead, the reader is directed to compare Jane’s condition to that of St. John, who reaches self-actualization, but also self-annihilation, by converting the people of India into Christians, thus harmonizing them with England’s expanding imperial state.

**Gothic Jokes and “The Yellow Wall-Paper”**

As noted, above, women’s literature of the nineteenth century is replete with what Carol Margaret Davison calls “gothic closets”: gothic tropes imported into nineteenth-century literary portrayals of contemporary domestic life. Within these texts, the gothic is closely associated with issues of women’s liberty. In writings about home décor, however, gothic tropes were generally invoked in relation to social status. Much of what fuelled the design reformers’ zeal was fear of the *arriviste* middle classes, who were frequently depicted as possessing more wealth than taste. In Wilkie Collins’s *Basil*, the eponymous hero, who falls in love with a girl he meets on the omnibus, arrives at her tradesman father’s household to discover an interior teeming with gaudy patterns and distracting colours:

Everything was oppressively new. Never was a richly furnished room more thoroughly comfortless than this—the eye ached looking round it. There was no repose anywhere. The print of the Queen … glared on you: the paper, the curtains, the carpet glared on you. … There was no look of shadow, shelter, secrecy, or retirement in any one nook or corner of those four gaudy walls. All surrounding
objects seemed startlingly near to the eye; much nearer than they really were. The room would have given a nervous man a headache. … (66-7)

Basil’s description emphasizes his feelings of being mobbed by the home’s furniture and décor: an intrusion so strongly felt that he fears possible illness. Collins’s portrayal of the tradesman’s parlour aligns with the prejudices of the design reformers; the gaudy interior is emblematic of the household’s contorted morality, which contaminates the aristocratic protagonist and eventually brings him to ruin.⁵⁶

Appropriating “gothic interior” tropes from women’s domestic literature to exaggerate the psychically detrimental effects of bad design was effective in two ways: it lampooned the disparaging pronouncements of the design reform movement while simultaneously diverting attention away from actual structures of oppression inscribed into domestic life. The comedic register deflected serious discussions about women’s vulnerabilities within those spaces, supplanting portrayals of “gothic” homes that evoked female characters’ “threat of self-loss” (DeLamotte 15) with comic depictions of the irritable aesthete’s hyperbolic response to tacky décor. In many literary works, however, such amusants of home-design rhetoric hinted at the existence of actual systems of oppression and inequality. In Henry James’s Spoils of Poynton, the widowed Mrs. Gareth, whose own unparalleled taste is on display in her gorgeous Poynton estate, describes the décor and furniture of the Brigstock’s home as “bad in all conscience,” full of “strange excrescences” (3), and complains that during her overnight visit the wallpaper in her room kept her “awake for hours” (1). She positions herself—much like Jane Eyre and Mr. Crumpet—as a gothic heroine terrified by her alien, malevolent surroundings, stating that she regrets having “rashly expose[d] herself” to its horrors. But such comic exaggerations mask the actual threat she feels within the Brigstock’s home. Its showy, vulgar interiors are indeed

⁵⁶ As seen in Morley’s story and numerous other middle-class publications, the target of the comic conceit was easily reversed, alluding to the invisible threats that plagued gothic heroines to ridicule the sensitivities of a feminized aristocracy (see Figs. 3, 5, and 6).
metonymic of the parvenu Brigstocks themselves, and function as the debased, nightmare version of Poynton should their daughter, Mona, marry Mrs. Gareth’s son and force the older woman to leave her home. Her descriptions of the Brigstock home’s “gross deviations” (4), therefore, reflect her fear of patriarchal reclamation of her cherished private space.

Initially, the unnamed narrator of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” treats the gothic literary tradition with the same attitude as Mrs. Gareth. Echoing the pronouncements of the mid-century design reformers, the narrator initially conflates bad design with bad morality. The narrator describes her sickroom wallpaper’s “sprawling flamboyant patterns” as committing “every artistic sin,” its colours smouldering with “unclean” yellows and “lurid” oranges. Furthermore, her disdain for the room’s decor seems deliberately exaggerated, brought on perhaps by lingering resentment (she would have preferred to have roomed in “the one downstairs that opened on the piazza and had roses all over the window” [12]), or by patrician sensitivities she does not share with her in-laws, who are of more practical stock (her physician husband and housekeeper sister-in-law are initially unbothered by the wallpaper).

As the narrative proceeds, however, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” reveals how the gothic is woven into the fabric of modern women’s lives.\(^{57}\) The narrator’s attitude toward the wallpaper shifts from haughty disdain to genuine fear and repulsion after her husband refuses to repaper the room. She begins to treat the wallpaper as an intrusive force; like a gothic anti-hero, it pays undue attention to her, watching with its “absurd, unblinking eyes” (Gilman 32). The narrator also describes its effects on her in physically violent terms: the design, she asserts, “slaps you in

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\(^{57}\) Because women’s rights as citizens in America were modelled on the English common law doctrine of coverture, the legal, social, and economic restrictions women experienced were virtually the same in both nations in the nineteenth century. Laws allowing women to own property or separate from their husbands were passed in a handful of states in the mid-1800s, but women’s enfranchisement was not addressed on a national scale until 1920 with the passing of the nineteenth amendment. Perhaps not un-coincidentally, Americans’ taste in décor was heavily influenced by England, to the point where the design reform movement was just as influential in America. As Muthesius argues, it makes sense to treat “the home” in the nineteenth century as prevalent throughout the Western world: “A common European and world market for luxury goods had existed for several centuries,” and “[f]urthermore, the Western world had also been relatively centralized for some centuries” (13)
the face, knocks you down, and tramples upon you” (37). She also articulates her fear of self-loss while studying its pattern, noting the curves that “suddenly commit suicide … destroying themselves in unheard of contradictions” (13). Eventually, she is able to discern a nightmarish mirror of her own condition in the wallpaper, perceiving a woman trapped behind the “bars” of the main pattern.

The debt of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” to Jane Eyre, particularly the narrator’s similarity to Bertha Mason, has been widely articulated.58 But to my knowledge it has not been conceived of as a feminist response to the “gothic interior” as a literary genre. In her famous short story, Gilman literalizes her era’s pervasive analogizing of bad taste to gothic horror in order to highlight points of overlap between coziness and menace in the nineteenth-century home.

In light of Gilman’s reclamation of the gothic interior from design reformers and their critics, we should reconsider interpretations of the eponymous wall-hanging of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as merely a blank slate onto which the narrator projects her inner turmoil. This interpretation ignores the symbolic load that wallpaper had already acquired by the turn of the century. As manufacturing techniques had allowed its wide dissemination—and perennial popularity—across all classes, wallpaper became inseparable from Victorians’ image of the home. Because it tended to imitate other, more expensive materials, wallpaper was often used in contemporary fiction metonymically to delineate characters who “who reject honesty and integrity in favour of sham and show” (“Short”). “The Yellow Wall-Paper” draws on this motif in its depiction of the characters’ “papering over” of certain darker truths about the narrator’s

domestic situation. Elaine Showalter suggests, for instance, that the narrator’s husband has deliberately chosen to restrain his wife within a former asylum to ensure she does not injure “her baby or herself during a postpartum psychosis” (“American” 7). By the late nineteenth century, the drawbacks of wallpaper were beginning to be more widely acknowledged—particularly its tendency to “accumulate dirt, such as dust, soot, and grease” (“Wallpaper: Health and Cleanliness”). In novels like Maupassant’s Bel-Ami (1885), for instance, the squalor and poverty of a Parisian lodging house is evoked through a prolonged meditation on its wallpaper:

Ses murs, tendus d’un papier gris à bouquets bleus, avaient autant de taches que de fleurs, des taches anciennes, suspectes, dont on n’aurait pu dire la nature, bêtes écrasées ou gouttes d’huile, bouts de doigts graissés de pomade ou écume de la cuvette projetée pendant les lavages. (Ch. 3)

[His wall, papered in grey with a pattern of blue flowers, displayed quite as many stains as the flowers, ancient, unidentifiable stains of dubious origin, which could have been squashed insects or splashes of oil, marks of fingers greasy with pomade, or soap scum splashed from the wash-basin.] (Mauldon 30)

Much like the red room contains traces of its deceased owner, encased within the wallpaper’s blemishes are the imprints of the activities of the lodging house’s inhabitants. With respect to “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” therefore, much of the story’s portentous atmosphere arises from the mysteries surrounding its former inhabitants. The narrator only knows that it’s a hereditary estate that had been “empty for years” because of “some legal trouble … something about heirs and co-heirs” (11). The reader, much like the narrator, has only the décor itself to intuit the identity of whoever left his or her mark on the interior. In other words, the nineteenth-century interior was designed to ensure that “traces of its inhabitant [were] molded into the interior” (Benjamin Arcades 20)—a strategy that, as a side effect, encouraged the production of haunted houses.

Critics have noted the contradictory signifiers of the narrator’s sick room. For instance, the narrator is convinced that the space was once a nursery or a boy’s school room, yet she is confused about the significance of the “rings and things in the walls” (Gilman 30). Conrad Shumaker argues that the narrator unwittingly describes a room “that has apparently been used to
confine mental cases” (594). Elaine Showalter agrees, stating that “it seems clear that it is an abandoned private mental hospital” with barred windows to “prevent inmates from jumping out” (“American” 133). Gilbert and Gubar describe the room’s “paraphernalia of confinement, like the gate at the head of the stairs” as “instruments that definitively indicate her imprisonment” (90). This interpretation provides some context for the violence done to the room, with its “scratched, gouged, and splintered” floor and great, heavy, bite-marked bed—perhaps too large for a child—that “looks as if it had been through the wars” (Gilman 33). The narrator notes that the paper has been ripped off the walls in places “about as far as [she] can reach” (31) suggesting that whoever tore it was of similar stature to herself.

But the critical assertions that the room was used as a holding cell are far from universal. As Greg Johnson notes, the room’s “physical details … are consistent with those of a typically ‘protective’ Victorian nursery and play-room” (526). And the narrator’s assumption that the space previously functioned as a nursery reflects widespread domestic practices that were formalized in nineteenth-century conduct manuals. In *Hygiene in the Nursery* (1899), renowned American paediatrician Louis Starr makes the following recommendations for constructing a nursery:

> Any room of the house will not do for a day nursery. … It should have a south-west exposure, and be, if possible, so situated in the building to allow of at least two broad windows.* … The Third floor of the house is a better elevation for the nursery, especially if there be an attic above, than the lower floors, partly because such rooms are remote from the ordinary domestic disturbances, but chiefly because they are drier and more readily heated, and being elevated, less cut off from sunlight by surrounding buildings. (63)

Because her sickroom contains nearly all of these benefits—ample sunlight and air, lots of space, remote location—the narrator’s assumption that the attic served as a nursery is reasonable. Even the bars on the windows, which so many critics have found ominous, were standard in every nursery. The asterisk in the quotation above leads to an authoritative footnote: “Nursery windows must always be strongly barred” to ensure that, in the days before screens, small children
couldn’t fall out of upper stories. That the narrator, a grown woman, is being treated like a child (John calls her “little girl” and at one point carries her back to her room when she begins to cry) is also an indictment of Ruskinean ideals of the home as a protective shell. The overstuffed sofas and heavy fabrics favoured in Victorian design also suggest a kind of infantilization, the objects protecting against any errant bumps or bruises. In overlaying traces of the room’s past as simultaneously an asylum and a nursery, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” reveals the semiotic mergings embedded in the structures of the nineteenth-century home, depicting a setting in which the signifiers of confinement and protection were one and the same. Many of the uncanny effects in the text therefore result from the revelation that a nursery and an asylum could be one and the same—not just concretely but also metaphysically.

If contemporary reviews of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” are any indication, the unnamed narrator’s décor-focused mania was neither unique nor surprising. One anonymous reviewer in *The American* describes the long illness of Alphonse Daudet, a French novelist who perceived “the face of a vicious man” in his frieze pattern, while “others have remarked that certain quilt patterns or wall paper patterns were calculated to drive them crazy” (Dock 106). Other reviewers, such as one anonymous source from 1899, skirt around the conclusion the story draws, unsure of whether to treat the idea of psychically harmful décor with seriousness or levity. The reviewer states that “everybody who has ever been ill in a room, the walls of which were covered with patterned paper, will appreciate this little book.” He then drolly admonishes, “[b]ut unless the publishers of the book wish to be responsible for a large crop of maniacs, they ought not to have covered it with what is apparently a reproduction of that fateful wallpaper.

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59 The nested enclosures that contain the narrator are similarly ambiguous with respect to their purpose. The stairway to her attic room is gated, and the house itself is situated inside a maze of boxy hedges and locked garden gates. The entire property is three miles from the closest village. Such excesses of enclosure could signify gothic imprisonment or Victorian introversion: is the home keeping the narrator in or pushing the outside world away?

After one glance at its pattern, one cannot wonder that the poor woman went crazy” (109). In a similar comment, which reveals more than the author likely intended, a review from Time and the Hour concludes, “It is a strong book. … a well-done, horrible book—a book to keep away from the young wife” (108).

Comic conceits about the ills attending “gothic” interiors were intended to disrupt design reformers’ vilification of the middle-class home. Yet, as discussed above, the trope simultaneously acknowledged and dismissed the possibility of being psychically overwhelmed in such spaces. In a recent New Yorker article, “Unreality Star,” author Andrew Marantz notes that although a disturbed mind “supplies the contours of delusions,” it is culture that “fills in the details.” The Victorian period’s focus on the home as a place of psychic refuge and self-protection, and the attendant anxieties over its corruption, offer compelling evidence of the culture’s struggles to acknowledge the more oppressive elements of nineteenth-century living. As a result, the gothic, with its invocation of excess and imperilment, was enlisted in order to articulate and sublimate the more noxious aspects of domestic existence. Nevertheless, by the century’s end the detrimental effects of women’s isolation and dependency became increasingly difficult to ignore. As Henry Blackwell baldly puts it in his review of “The Yellow Wall-Paper”:

Nothing more graphic and suggestive has ever been written to show why so many women go crazy, especially farmer’s wives, who live lonely, monotonous lives. A husband of the kind described in this little sketch once said that he could not account for his wife’s having gone insane—”for,” said he, “to my certain knowledge she has hardly left her kitchen and bedroom in 30 years.” (Dock 107)

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63 From Marantz: “Grandiose schizophrenics from largely Christian countries often claim to be prophets or gods, but sufferers in Pakistan, a Muslim country, rarely do. In Shanghai, paranoid people report being pricked by poisoned needles; in Taipei, they are possessed by spirits. Shifts in technology have caused the content of delusions to change over the years: in the nineteen-forties, the Japanese controlled American minds with radio waves; in the fifties, the Soviets accomplished this with satellites; in the seventies, the C.I.A. implanted computer chips into people’s brains.” See also Joel Gold, and Ian Gold, Suspicious Minds: How Culture Shapes Madness (Free Press, 2014).
Arriving at the end of the century, Gilman’s bold indictment reflected a *fin-de-siècle* paradigm shift, which was more than ready to criticize, in the words of Charles Kingsley, the “prudery of a not over cleanly, though carefully white-washed age” (Allott 343).65

**Conclusion**

This chapter argues that the use of gothic motifs in Victorian depictions of the domestic is not simply a “hand-me-down devic[e]” (Heilman 120) to exaggerate or intensify certain psychological states, but a recognition that the domestic realm in the nineteenth century was constructed in light of the era’s competitive models of individuation—and simultaneously allotting its male owners the lion’s share of control over domestic space. In an era that was deeply invested in self-cultivation as inextricable from acting upon the world, women found their subjectivities subsumed within their husband’s homes, filled with possessions that functioned as extensions of their husband’s personality.

Ironically, one the most revealing real-life examples of the ways in which the Victorian domestic realm was constructed to expand the subjectivities of men while colonizing those of women is found in the parallel fates of Charles Dickens’s two “wives.” After becoming infatuated with the young actress Ellen Ternan, Dickens, who was described by his biographer and friend John Forster as having an intensely “domestic nature” (473), began to dismantle his marriage to Catherine Hogarth Dickens by “quite literally wall[ing] her off” (Bodenheimer 158), constructing a partition that transformed their shared bedroom into two separate suites. He later banished Catherine entirely from the family home and restricted her access to their ten children, installing her within a “small—but pretty—house … with £600 a year for life” (Tomalin *Invisible Woman* 116). He justified his actions by relying on the familiar pretext of wifely insanity, depicting Catherine as “an unfit, emotionally disturbed mother” (Bodenheimer 161): an

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inharmonious thing. Ellen “Nelly” Ternan was similarly sequestered by Dickens along with her mother and sisters. Taken from the stage and placed in a succession of rented houses, her movements were necessarily restricted to maintain the appearance of respectability. Though Dickens disdained one and adored the other, their living situations were eerily parallel: both women were spatially isolated and entirely dependent on Dickens’s largesse.

In spite of the cruelties that Dickens inflicted, Catherine remained a dedicated wife to the very end. After Dickens’s death she continued living alone in the house in which he had placed her during their separation, but had the solace of frequent visits to the family’s former home at Gad’s Hill, which their son Charles Jr. had purchased. At one point, she rather ghoulishly remarked to her daughter-in-law that after twelve years of widowhood she felt that “nobody was nearer to Dickens than she was” (Tomalin Charles Dickens 404). After twenty-two years of marriage—and twelve years of separation—in which she, according to her daughter Kate, was never “allowed to express an opinion” or to “say what she felt” (415), a life outside the physical and psychological structures that Dickens had fashioned for her was apparently undesired—or inconceivable.

“Resourceful little Nelly Ternan” (Isba 137), on the other hand, had a very different response to Dickens’s domestic containments, adapting what she had learned by being the author’s “wife” to obtain its more lawful version after his death. Similar to Bertha in Jane Eyre, she “objectified” herself by annihilating her past. Ternan took fourteen years off her age and erased her history with Dickens, transforming herself back into a young, eligible maiden ready to be nested within another parlour.66

66 Nelly married George Wharton Robinson, a clergyman, six years after Dickens’s death. Their children knew nothing of her history with Dickens until after her death in 1914. It remains unclear whether her husband’s mental breakdown in 1886 was related to his discovery about her past.
In a recorded e-mail conversation from 2012, philosopher Timothy Morton and the experimental songwriter Björk discuss the possibility of a “post-human” landscape in which “the human is not at the centre of the world.” Morton picks out a recent song, “Virus,” arguing that “being alive means being susceptible to viruses,” and praises Björk’s oeuvre for demonstrating that fusion with “nonhuman beings” does not necessarily lead to loss of self. Björk responds to Morton with: “Yes: we can merge and survive / 1+ 1 is three / I know it.”

In their resistance to influence by domestic objects that surround them, a majority of the novels I have discussed reveal their commitment to Victorian notions of bordered selfhood. If character’s identities are too permeable—too readily affected by physiological processes, environmental stimuli, or hereditary weaknesses—they potentially lose their status as a self-mastering individual. As noted in the previous chapter, only certain people were afforded the status of having the potential for subject sovereignty in the nineteenth century. Contemporary novels, particularly the Bildungsroman, often conclude once their protagonists have successfully overcome hereditary, social, or geographical hurdles that might otherwise limit their potential. In the case of Jane Eyre, meanwhile, her goal is less to challenge the construct of privileged subjectivity and more to position herself as deserving inclusion. Her commitment to resisting the nihilistic charms of Rochester’s Thornfield Hall is ominously inverted in “The Yellow Wallpaper,” in which the unnamed protagonist’s descent into madness results in the merging of her psyche with the wallpaper she once abhorred.

67 The Dazzle (2000), a play by Richard Greenberg, is set in early twentieth-century Harlem and centers on two characters: Homer and Langley Collyer, who were notorious for their bizarre behaviour and compulsive hoarding.
Nonetheless, there are instances in nineteenth-century literature when permeability of self is not depicted as an inherent tragedy. In some queer writing, for example, such moments often signal a kind of metaphysical liberation. In *The Vanishing Subject*, Judith Ryan argues that the works of fin-de-siècle aesthetes like Walter Pater, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Henry James portray a “purely evanescent” (3) self that anticipates the formal experiments of literary modernism. More recently, Denis Denisoff finds an interest in “counter-humanist deindividuation and species intersubjectivity” (“Dissipating Nature” 432) based on an observation of queer Decadent writers’ attraction to paganism. And Heather K. Love understands the writers’ grammatically fluid, often oblique writing style and his “fascination with the disappearing subject” as a rejection of the “modern regimes of categorization, discipline, stigma” (24). Many queer theorists have focused on the late nineteenth-century “vaporization of the subject” (Ryan 27) to tease out more fluid, anti-normative conceptions of identity, challenging the modern subject-object binary.

In fact, recent philosophical movements to imagine a world beyond the regime of the human have long been a vital component of queer theory. In their introduction to a 2015 special issue of *GLQ*, on “Queer Humanisms,” Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen argue that the discipline’s “foundational texts interrogate, implicitly or explicitly, the nature of the ‘human’ and its relation to the queer” (186). Such engagements are often critical of LGBTQ rights activism that rehashes Jane Eyre’s efforts to tether her “othered” identity onto the sphere of ontological privilege rather than critiquing its structures of exclusion (Sarah Ahmed uses the term “homonormativity” to describe queer acceptance of heteronormative institutions such as marriage). Such critiques provide opportunities for intersectional work that blends queer theory and thing theory. Queer theorist Jean Paul Ricco, for instance, suggests getting rid of all forms of
“subject” and “object” and locating modes of engagement “in which relation is primary.” In other words, both queer theory and object-oriented philosophies attempt to move away from liberal humanist nations of subjectivity to establish less exclusionary, categorical concepts of “being.”

Thus, what many literary critics have described as the “de-humanizing impulse” of the nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement can be interpreted as a welcoming of subject-object fluidity. To put it another way, many nineteenth-century authors that, at present, we habitually identify as queer, demonstrated a willingness (to paraphrase Pater’s preface to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*) to have their nature modified by the non-human. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin identifies what he considers to be the characteristic nineteenth-century type: the flâneur, whose passion, according to Charles Baudelaire (who originally coined the term) is “to become one flesh with the crowd” (9). Benjamin implies that “the collector,” another notable nineteenth-century “type,” is the flâneur’s inverted mirror: a collector abandons himself to the collection in order to experience “an intoxicated assimilation, superposition, equalization” (418). Strikingly, both Benjamin’s and Baudelaire’s descriptions assume that the individual in question is able to control the terms of his own fragmentation. Benjamin writes of the joys of “hovering above the abyss”: the collector, he contends, “loses himself, assuredly. But he has the strength to pull himself up again by nothing more than a straw” (205). This statement is haunted by his later, more sinister suggestion that the “intricate convolutions” (215) of the nineteenth-century interior “integrate[s] the individual” (224) into itself.

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69 The essays collected by editor Kelly Comfort in *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist, and the Artistic Receptor*—particularly Ileana Martin’s “Rosetti’s Aesthetically Saturated Readings: Art’s De-Humanizing Power” (pp. 42-61)—provide useful context for the term.
70 “The objects with which aesthetic criticism deals, music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life, are indeed the receptacles of so many powers or forces; they possess, like natural elements, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture … What effect does it really produce on me? … How is my nature modified by its presence or under its influence?” (Pater 3).
In both Joris-Karl Huysmans’s À rebours and Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray, the protagonists construct vast private collections that serve to bolster their “radical” identities. In doing so, however, both authors investigate the possible fluidities between “collector” and “collected,” and consider whether having one’s identity altered by external forces can be a constructive, even vital, experience. Because both protagonists are coded as homosexual, the benefits of being “infiltrated” are established as being particularly accessible to individuals unwilling or unable to align themselves with their century’s emerging, heteronormative constructions of identity. In both works, the vocabulary of Catholicism aids the authors in conceptualizing a fluid, relational—in other words, queer—form of subject-object interaction. Catholicism’s doctrines of spiritual “possession”—transubstantiation, divine grace, and demonology—provide a discourse of ontological fluidity that both authors draw upon to investigate the ways in which people and things blend into and modify each other. Doctrinally, grace is essentially a supernatural “push” to holiness inflicted upon souls by God, providing a discourse to consider infiltration of the self by external forces as an act of salvation rather than corruption.

The protagonists’ relationship to their collections examined in this chapter, in fact, take issue with the sharp metaphysical distinctions drawn by their culture between active subjects and inert objects by portraying an intensely materialistic universe in which human behaviour is heavily determined by biological processes and inherited structures. The novels’ periodical ambiguities about who or what in the relationship is controlling the flow of influence between the subject and objects bears some resemblance to Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory, wherein subjects and objects are replaced with actants, describing any volitional actor—human or non-human—that displays intention, drive, or influence. As I describe in more detail below, the homosexuality of the protagonists, who, according to nineteenth-century medical discourses,
possessed thoughts, proclivities and physiologies predetermined by heredity and environment, underscores the ontological equivalences the novels draw between the protagonists and their collections.

In both novels, but in directly inverse ways, the nineteenth-century model of acquisitive individuation is interrogated through the protagonists’ relationships with their possessions, exposing the unforeseen consequences attending that model of being-in-the-world. In À rebours, the degenerate aristocrat Des Esseintes physically and mentally falls apart within the very interior that he constructs to buffer himself against contamination from the modern world. The novel leaves ambiguous the question whether his deterioration is a result of “feed[ing] on his own substance” (Baldick 70) [“se nourrissait de sa propre substance” (Huysmans ch. 7)] or arises from the influence of his collection of religiously-inflected ephemera. In The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde experiments with the subject-object relations that Huysmans constructs in his infamous book by depicting a protagonist whose body cannot be influenced by external entities. As a result of the magic of Dorian’s portrait, Wilde’s protagonist is increasingly entombed within the confines of a hardened, unalterable carapace of identity. This chapter concludes that, rather than embracing the alleged Decadent ethos of radical individualism, both texts assert that non-conforming identities can only be protected by sublimating the self, as W. B. Yates intones, within “an universal transmutation of things” (56).

The Nineteenth-Century Queer Collector

In “Beautiful Things: Nonsense and the Museum,” Barton and Bates argue that Victorians understood identity “as and through the collection, display, and labelling of an array of objects” (59). Character, previously connected to one’s moral state, became “personality” by the end of the era: a condition that was not innate but one that was earned through distinctiveness, performance, and display. Just as the creation of museums in the nineteenth
century served to manifest imperial sovereignty by “subjecting the unruly parade of foreign objects to the strict discipline of classification” (Daly 31), the popularity of private collecting reflected a desire to manifest and control one’s identity. As a result, as illustrated in the previous chapter, the domestic interior became a crucial site of self-fashioning.

Collecting had long been a part of upper-class life, but in the nineteenth century, as Yallop notes, the hobby “moved away from the country houses of the rich into the fashionable townhouses of the increasingly confident and wealthy middle class” (26). Benjamin evocatively conveys the sovereign power of the collector, who captures the wayward, semiotically unstable items circulating within a capitalist economy and encloses them “within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired) it turns to stone” (Arcades 205). In a world in which liberal concepts of individual will were haunted by material-determinist conceptions of human psychology, collecting provided a means of substantiating and protecting a coherent identity.

Such a refuge was a potentially attractive option to individuals whose lives were increasingly being monitored by the state. As Foucault famously argues in The History of Sexuality, in the nineteenth century homosexuality was transformed from an act into a species:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. (43)

The homosexual man, in other words, became objectified: “an object of analysis, and a target of intervention” (26). Medical treatises stripped any targeted individual of autonomy by depicting him not as a person but as “a medical and medicalizable object … a lesion, dysfunction, or a symptom” (44). Yvonne Ivory argues that in response to such dehumanizing discourses, queer men of the upper classes frequently engaged in what she refers to as “radical individualism.”
They deliberately cultivated a highly idiosyncratic identity: “As increased pressure was exerted on the nineteenth century man-loving man to identify with new legal and medical models of inversion, the notion of individualist agency and self-culture became more appealing—and even more necessary—to the shoring up of alternative identities” (51). Private homes, free from the prying eyes of the state, were treated as a “safe space” to cultivate counter-cultural identities, both individually and collectively. Whitney Davis, for instance, argues that private homosexual art collections in the nineteenth century created a “canonical homoerotic judgement of the beautiful” against what modern culture “preferred to see as inherently non- or unreplicable” (272). On both sides of the English Channel, “house-museums” proliferated. The aesthete Count Robert de Montesquiou’s attic apartment contained a heterogeneous collection of objects so unusual that Mallarmé nicknamed it “Ali-Baba’s Cave.” Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower’s Windsor lodge, stuffed with “portraits of vanished society beauties” and “a personal array of vintage Franco-British bric-à-brac” (Davis 247) is another example. Oscar Wilde and Walter Pater were also known for their dedication to the “house beautiful,” which emphasized the careful selection and acquisition of decorative objects.71

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As queer individuals were increasingly classified according to legal and medical forms of discourse, highly eclectic private collections came to be regarded as a symptom of “sexual introversion.” As Yallop suggests, “there was something about collecting that suggested abnormality, sexual impotence, personal failure” (246). While magazines like *Punch* jokingly portrayed collecting as a kind of “mania,” (see Fig. 5), many contemporary psychologists did not hesitate to pathologize the inclination. In his screed on *fin-de-siècle* maladies, Max Nordau argues that “there exists an irresistible desire among the degenerate to accumulate useless trifles” (27). Even Walter Benjamin hints at perversities lingering within the presumed centre of heteronormative family life (see Fig. 6), describing the bourgeois home as “an alluring creature,” where the “extravagant interior design of the period” creates a “Uranian atmosphere” of queer possibility (*Arcades* 216). Bachelor-collectors represented an unwanted consequence of the nineteenth century’s celebration of the “self-made” individual, generating fears that certain objects could be collected and arranged to support illicit, socially unacceptable identities.

But in conceiving of private collections as incubators of radical individualism—a means to develop an idiosyncratic individual who “burn[s] always with [a] hard gem-like flame” (Pater 120)—critics like Ivory risk recreating the exclusionary discourses that inform modern concepts

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72 From the Oxford English Dictionary online, *Uranian:* “Relating to or befitting heaven; celestial, heavenly” or “Homosexual; pederastic; spec. (of poetry) expressing an admiration for male youth.” Both usages were prevalent around the turn of the century.
of subject sovereignty. Aestheticism and commodity culture require similar relationships between people and things. The relationship of the “radical” individual to his collection still assumes an imperialist concept of selfhood that relies on territorial expansion and acquisition to sustain itself.

The idea of the private collection as the tool of the self-fashioning individual is also complicated by contemporary accounts of disorientation experienced within object-filled interiors. Numerous works on the Great Exhibition, for instance, note that the spectacle inside the Crystal Palace did not always inspire a sense of mastery over the world. “I am ‘used up’ by the exhibition,” Charles Dickens wrote in a private letter. “There’s too much. … So many things bewildered me.”73 The Dublin University Magazine, meanwhile, hyperbolized the transfixing effects of the Exhibition by describing it as “an embodied, animated cosmorama to lose yourself in for a month” (“London” 614). Benjamin describes a similar threat of losing oneself within the walls of the domestic sphere as result of the space’s “satanic nihilism” (Arcades 218). He describes a realm in which the era’s subject-object relations are inverted: instead of individuals filling their homes with inert objects, the objects act upon their masters. As a result, occupants of the domestic sphere are, in Benjamin’s portrayal, strangely inert inhabitants pacified by the “hashish intoxication” of their interiors. The

transformative relationships that Huysman’s desiccated protagonist in À rebours forms with his collection may serve as a notable exception. Though Huysmans is cagey about whether Des Esseintes’ growing religious inclinations are the result of hereditary degeneration or are influenced by his possessions, À rebours nevertheless recasts the degenerate individual whose autonomy has been compromised by heredity and environment as, paradoxically, closer to obtaining sovereign subjectivity than the bourgeois patriarch, the apparent apotheosis of liberal individualism that the novel nonetheless portrays as being an interchangeable “type” wholly moulded by the forces of capitalism.74

À rebours

As indicated by the protagonist’s family name (“Esseintes” is a cognate of essence), À rebours is a text preoccupied with the foundations of being. The synesthesia in which the character so delights, the blending of different senses and fusions architectoniques of aesthetic décor, his love of unexpected artistic combinations that “joi[n] and fus[e] in one” (56) [“réunissant, fondant en une seule” (ch. 5)] are meditations on how much an individual can be distilled, corrupted, or perverted before transforming into someone (or something) else entirely.75

As the protagonist’s health becomes increasingly compromised and his control over his private retreat ever weaker, he becomes obsessed with extractions, attempting to locate a given entity’s essential purity of form. He thumbs through contemporary prose poems for “the osmazome of literature, the essential oil of art” (183) [l’osmazome de la littérature, l’huile essentielle de l’art (ch.14)] while he subsists on concentrated beef juice and dreams of the “syntax” of precious stones.

74 Des Esseintes repeatedly reduces the bourgeois class to a single archetype: the bourgeois’ optics is “insensible to the pomp and glory of the clear, bright colours” (Baldick 15); he has a “frivolous love of show” (202); he is “jovial” and puts all his trust “in the power of his money (203).” The third-person narrator does not contradict Des Esseintes’ declarations.

75 Translation by Margaret Mauldon: “unit[e] and mel[d] into a single entity’ (56). Unless otherwise noted, all in-text translations are from Robert Baldick.
The author’s preoccupation in the novel with the essence of being is also reflected in his engagement with the century’s two conflicted models of human psychology: humanity as made up of sentient individuals in control of their own destinies, or, conversely, of powerless material organisms acted upon by external stimuli. In À rebours, Des Esseintes is equal parts Romantic individualist, wilfully non-conforming and intensely introspective, and Naturalist automaton, his preferences and thoughts dictated by biology. The novel’s preface initially characterizes Des Esseintes as wholly existing in the latter category. The third-person narrator, instead of beginning with a description of the protagonist himself, describes a hallway filled with the portraits of members of the character’s aristocratic lineage. The narrator therefore positions Des Esseintes not as an autonomous being but as a genealogical echo of his long-dead ancestors. One particular portrait, with its rouged cheeks and pearl-laced neck, signifies the family’s strain of “sexual inversion”: a term for homosexuality that French psychologists were virtually unanimous in diagnosing as a form of hereditary degeneration that created “appetites and interests [that] control … will and drive irresistibly” (Copley 140). As Ellis Hanson points out, although À rebours “has always been popular with gay men,” it is also “alarmingly homophobic”; any reference to same-sex relationships is regarded with “medical horror” (139). The gradual “inversion” of Des Esseintes’ sexual desire is implicitly caused by “a brain over-stimulated by neurosis” (103) [“un cerveau surexcité par la névrose” (ch. 9)], the effects of which can be traced through the trajectory of his sexual relationships with increasingly boy-like women. One of Des Esseintes’ final trysts before he temporarily loses his sanity is with another man: an encounter that he “submitted to” and which “somehow lasted several months” (102) [“supporté” … “se prolongea durant des mois”].

76 “In A Rebours Huysmans draws heavily on this medical connection between inversion and hysteria in men, though he was wont to slip into the religious language of sodomy and demonic possession” (Hanson 141).
Initially, the character is aligned with an unconventional, yet still recognizable, concept of liberal individualism. Des Esseintes’ education is stubbornly self-driven. His Jesuit teachers allow the young boy to cultivate his own interests, “not wishing to turn this independent spirit against them” (6) [“ne voulant pas s’aliéner cet esprit indépendant” (prol.)]. As an adult, Des Esseintes decisively breaks off from his extended family, which he dismisses as made up of “fossilized nonentities” (Mauldon 6) [“des êtres immuables et nuls”], as if the clan’s degeneration has left them mere husks of humanity.77 His relatives’ immobility signals their lack of individuation; his mother is a “still, supine figure” (Baldick 4) [“immobile et couchée”] in a darkened bedroom, while his cousin’s family is made up of undead “mummies entombed in their Pompadour catafalques behind rococo panelling” (7) [“ces momies ensevelies dans leurs hypogées pompadour à boiseries et à rocaillés”], their interiors permeating into their bodies and hardening them into corpse-like rigidity. After failing to connect with any of the social groups he encounters in modern Paris, Des Esseintes concludes that he is a resolutely singular being who can “entertain no hope of linking up with a mind … like his own” (8) [“aucun espoir de s’accoupler avec une intelligence … ainsi que la sienne…”], and dedicates the remainder of his life to celebrating his own unique individuality. Des Esseintes is convinced that, within his hermetic pleasure palace, he can crystallize an identity independent of his heredity and upbringing—or at least, that he can forge an identity in which can aestheticize his degeneracy to ironic effect, therefore allowing him symbolically to master it.

In spite of his disgust for bourgeois materialism, Des Esseintes’ relationship with his home at Fontenay assumes a similar ethos of mastery. He designs and arranges every inch of his built environment, and, once his home is completed, spends his time re-classifying “people, plants, ideas, information, objects, sounds, scents, tastes” based on his own metrics (McGuinness xxiv). Matthew Potolsky argues that Des Esseintes’ collections function as a “countercanon”

77 Baldick translates as “men” with “an unalterable emptiness of mind” (6).
against the formation of increasingly nationalized literary and aesthetic traditions in the
nineteenth century (223). Des Esseintes’s idiosyncratic and cosmopolitan possessions
intentionally bolster a radical identity in opposition to nationalist ideologies. But he is still
committed to imperialist notions of sovereignty via material acquisition, evident in his collection
of the tools of colonial expansion. He designs his dining room to resemble a ship’s cabin,
equipping it with “chronometers and compasses … sextants and dividers … binoculars and
charts” (20). Patrick McGuinness notes that Des Esseintes’ initial relationship to his collections
mirrors that of “the early twentieth-century (American) millionaire: buying, transporting,
transplanting” (xxix). Instead of rejecting heteronormative, imperialist forms of identity
formation, he champions them, describing artifice as “the distinctive mark of human genius” (22)
[“la marque distinctive du génie de l’homme” (ch. 2)], which he contrasts with the monotonous
indolence of feminized “nature”:\footnote{Note the original is more accurately translated to “Man’s genius.”}

After all, to take what among all her works is considered to be the most exquisite,
what among all her creations is deemed to possess the most perfect and original
beauty—to wit, woman—has not man for his part, by his own efforts, produced
an animate yet artificial creature that is every bit as good from the point of view
of plastic beauty? Does there exist, anywhere on this earth, a being conceived in
the joys of fornication and born in the throes of motherhood who is more
dazzlingly, more outstandingly beautiful than the two locomotives recently put
into service on the Northern Railway? (23)

Des Esseintes believes one must act upon inert material to achieve mastery over it. To be acted
upon by “nature” is to take on the stereotypical passive attributes of the feminine; readily
impregnated, ravished, infiltrated. Meanwhile, Des Esseintes obsesses over the entities that enter
his own body, supervising the tastes, sights, smells, and sounds to which it is exposed to safeguard against being sickened through contagion—be they microbes or ideas. To ensure that he does not mimic the living habits of the bourgeois he despises, therefore, he eschews “terribly vulgar” [“singulièrement commun” (ch. 4)] diamonds for obscure semi-precious stones like “Ceylon cat’s-eyes, cymophanes and sapphirines” (Baldick 42), and avoids “Oriental rugs and fabrics, which had become so commonplace” [“il tâcha de ne pas user … des étoffes et des tapis de l’Orient, devenus … si fastidieux et si communs” (ch. 1)].

He does permit himself to become “intoxicated”—to allow his body to be overtaken by sensations triggered by his collection of objects—but, at least at first, he remains the conductor of his self’s permeability. The third-person narrator instructs the reader as to how to mimic Des Esseintes’ flâneur-like “un/control”: “The main thing is to know how to set about it, to be able to concentrate your attention on a single detail, to forget yourself sufficiently to bring about the desired hallucination” (22) [“Le tout est de savoir s’y prendre, de savoir concentrer son esprit sur un seul point, de savoir s’abstraire suffisamment pour amener l’hallucination” (ch. 2)]. Much in the manner Benjamin suggests, Des Esseintes “loses himself” by permitting the objects of collection to temporarily assume prominence of place. In chapter three of À rebours, the narration shifts from Des Esseintes’ thoughts and actions to an extensive description of his collection of Classical Latin literature. The books function as metonyms of their authors, enacting a homosocial—and covertly homoerotic—parade of personalities whose works concatenate to reproduce the fall of Rome for their owner’s pleasure:

With the Western Empire crumbling to ruin all around [Claudian], amid the horror of the repeated massacres occurring on every side, and under the threat of invasion by the barbarians now pressing in their hordes against the creaking gates of the Empire, he calls Antiquity back to life, sings of the Rape of Proserpine, daubs his canvas with glowing colours and goes by with all his lights blazing through the darkness closing in upon the world. (34)

Dans l’Empire d’Occident qui s’effondre de plus en plus, dans le gâchis des égorgements réitérés qui l’entourent; dans la menace perpétuelle des Barbares qui se
pressent maintenant en foule aux portes de l’Empire dont les gonds craquent, il ranime l’antiquité, chante l’enlèvement de Proserpine, plaque ses couleurs vibrantes, passe avec tous ses feux allumés dans l’obscurité qui envahit le monde.] (ch. 3)

Des Esseintes’ physiology frequently flows into and melds with other entities, mostly objects in his home, demonstrating the “dissipative model” of individuality that critics like Denisoff have located in nineteenth-century queer thought (432). At certain points in the chapter Des Esseintes disappears completely. Instead, the third-person narrator focuses on the Roman authors’ literary descriptions of the death of their world. When Des Esseintes does reappear, he is placed in a grammatically passive position in relation to the books; the texts, variously “utterly exasperated him” (28), “attracted him” (29), “gave him enormous pleasure” (31), or “left him cold” (32) [“enfin toute l’inénarrable” … “pouvait lui plaire” … “le réjouissait” … “le laissaient froid”]. At the end of the chapter, Des Esseintes is the distant god of the book collection; the narrator posits his lack of interest in non-Medieval Latin texts as the reason why the books, which have “tailed away to nothing,” suddenly “make a prodigious jump of several centuries” (39), [“cessaient” … “en un saut formidable de siècles”]. The premise is that Des Esseintes has infused the collection with a life of its own and left it to its own devices.

But Des Esseintes begins to lose his ability to regulate his collection’s new life; his efforts to contort nature into exquisitely degenerate forms begin to miscarry. The turtle whose shell he had covered in semi-precious stones dies cowering in a corner. His vast collection of exotic plants, which he selected for their appearance of decay, literally withers away.

Meanwhile, the balance of power in his home begins to shift as interactions with his collections of gems and religious paintings bring on unwanted memories:

The confused mass of reading and meditation on artistic themes that he had accumulated since he had been on his own like a barrage to hold back the current of old memories, had suddenly been carried away, and the flood let loose, sweeping away the present and future, submerging everything under the waters of the past, covering his mind with a great expanse of melancholy, on the surface of which there drifted, like ridiculous bits of flotsam, trivial episodes of his existence, absurdly insignificant incidents. (70)
As he involuntarily “re-collects,” Des Esseintes becomes a kind of permeable, multi-organism collective himself, into which his surroundings permeate. His body’s ailments begin to reassert themselves, and he laments that he is “no longer master of his own house” (73) [“ne plus être maître absolu chez lui”]. As McGuinness notes, Des Esseintes becomes increasingly “squeezed out” (xxix) of entire swaths of the text by descriptions of his collection and the flights of imaginative fancy they inspire—and it is frequently unclear whether the text’s lengthy digressions originate from Des Esseintes, the narrator, or the collection itself. Des Esseintes is caught, to borrow a line from Rita Felski’s rejection of arbitrary forms of disciplinary containment, in the “profusion of whirlpools and rapids, eddies and flows, in which objects, ideas, images, and texts from different moments swirl, tumble, and collide in ever-changing combinations and constellations” (578). Every attempt Des Esseintes makes to reassume control over his collection rebounds against him. He tries to use his encyclopedia of perfumes to evoke the scent of women “rollicking pleasures out in the sun” (110) [“de joies qui se démènent au plein soleil” (ch. 10)] only to become overwhelmed by their odour: “he began to wonder whether he might not be in the grip of one of those evil spirits they used to exorcize in the middle ages” (115) [“… se demandant s’il n’était point décidément sous le joug d’une de ces possessions qu’on exorcisait au moyen âge”]. After pontificating to himself once again about man’s domination of nature while enjoying his collection of exotic plants, Des Esseintes experiences a nightmare in which a sentient flower engulfs him in her vaginal folds (92). Though his possessions are never explicitly personified, Des Esseintes nevertheless experiences them as an assertive, sometimes overwhelming presence, creating a “flattened ontological space” in which
“the difference between subjects and objects, between animate and inanimate things, is blurred by the possibility of animation, reanimation, vivification and revivification” (Freedgood Things 141).

Without the novel’s injection of Catholic cosmology, À rebours can be easily read as a tragicomic tale of an eccentric aesthete’s failed attempt at radical individualism, concluding with his forced return to Paris—and to a bourgeois existence—on doctor’s orders. Using this lens, the incursion of religiosity into his life is yet another corruptive influence brought on by the insidious conditioning of his Jesuit upbringing, and even more, to the influence of “Latin works he loved … written by bishops and monks” (73) [“La lecture des ouvrages latins qu’il aimait … rédigés par des évêques et par des moines” (ch. 7)]. His religiously inflected objects—the obscure Catholic writings, his monkish bedroom, his etchings of sectarian violence, all of which he ostensibly acquired for aesthetic enjoyment, can be interpreted as actively contributing to his spiritual transformation. After extended contact with religious art and literature, his mind, in spite of himself, “ponder[s] over … odd scraps of schisms and heresies … in the mysteries of the Incarnation” (75) [“il pensait, malgré lui … Des bribes de ces schismes, des bouts de ces heresies … le mystère de l’Incarnation” (ch. 7)]. As well, his ailing health requires him to live like a penitent, giving up all intoxicants and stimulants while fasting regularly. Des Esseintes temporarily fights off his religious urges through medical enemas and extended delvings into his collection of modern profane literature, but eventually he feels “his disordered brain being carried away on waves of music and plunged into the religious atmosphere of his adolescence” (186) [“son cerveau délirant emporté dans des ondes musicales, roulé dans les tourbillons mystiques de son enfance” (ch. 15)]. Finally, he “abandon[s] himself” to the “sound of the psalms echoing slowly and softly in his head” (191) [Il finissait par s’abandonner … par le chant des psaumes qui s’élevait, sur un ton lent et bas, dans sa tête”]. When Des Esseintes regains
consciousness, the narrator notes that “he scarcely knew himself” (“il se reconnaissait à peine”). The illness has transformed him into a manifestation of the death and decay he has always worshipped, with “watery eyes burning with feverish brightness in this hairy death’s-head” (191) [“les yeux agrandis et liquoreux qui brûlaient d’un éclat fébrile dans cette tête de squelette, hérissée de poils”].

In contrast to the images of corruption and decay that inflect most of the novel’s representations of queer subject-object relations and hybridized identities, however, Des Esseintes’ faith has been “implanted into him … and imperceptibly taken root in his soul, [which] was now blossoming out in these secluded conditions” (74) [“lui avaient aussi inculqué … qui s’était lentement et obscurément ramifié dans son âme, qui s’épanouissait aujourd’hui, dans la solitude”]. The narrator uses the imagery of birth and new growth to convey the character’s sublimation within his religious collections, suggesting that its intercession is creating the conditions of self-renewal. Des Esseintes exhibits a dramatic reversal of priorities in the final chapter. Before his illness, he is confident that the “last ray of light enters the soul and draws together to a common centre all the truths that lie scattered therein” [“le dernier trait de lumière pénètre dans l’âme et rattache à un centre commun les vérités qui y sont éparses” (ch. 7)] will never come to him. He is too proud to partake in “mortification and prayer without which … no conversion is possible” (73) [“de mortification et de prière sans lequel … aucune conversion n’est possible”]. But in response to his doctor’s injunction, Des Esseintes yearns for a spiritual, homosocial life “among the ecclesiastics” (200) [“parmi …. les ecclésiastiques” (ch. 14)]. His shift in worldview is also evident in his sudden detachment from his surroundings. His rooms “began to get on his nerves; the faults he had overlooked by force of habit struck him at once …

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79 Mauldon translates this passage as “the huge, watery eyes which burned with a feverish glitter in that skeletal head covered with bristling hair” (168-9).
80 Mauldon: “the final ray of light that penetrates the soul and connects to a common centre the truths that lie scattered there” (72).
He thought of changing them” (195) […] l’agaça ; des défauts auxquels l’habitude l’avait accoutumé lui sautèrent aux yeux …. il pensa à les changer” (ch. 15]).

Even with these virus-like invasions some “essence” of Des Esseintes’ personality remains; in his final religious contemplations he exhibits the same class snobbery and sadomasochism as he did when he was a non-believing libertine. The idea that some kernel of his old self survives and is even energetically reasserted after his unsought transformation provides a more optimistic alternative to McGuinness’s assertion that Des Esseintes’ decline is a result of his nihilistic feeding upon his own essence. In the final line of the novel, where he pleads to God to “take pity on the Christian who doubts” (204) [“prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute” (ch. 16)], Des Esseintes seeks an external force powerful enough to overcome an ego that bristles at the thought of “heav[ing] the lead” into “social waters” (198) in search of a “twin spirit” [“esprit jumeau”].

In À rebours, the river’s continual state of flux symbolizes the dissipation of personality and openness to continual transmutations of being that Des Esseintes must embrace if he is to survive. He believes this can be achieved by residing within a mendicant order, if only he could find a means to “let [him]self drift along the stream” [se laisser emporter par ce courant]. Des Esseintes admits he is unable to complete the conversion on his own, which is a notable reversal of the solipsistic urges that compelled him to live in his hermetic pleasure palace in the first place—and also challenges nineteenth-century idealizations of the “self-made man.”

The novel is ambiguous about whether Des Esseintes ultimately “converts.” However, the character acknowledges that the impetus towards conversion was set in motion by the events that took place in Fontenay, which “forced [him] to turn over a new leaf” (200). Rather than “staying

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81 The original line: “dans quel monde devait-il sonder” is more directly translated to “in what social world should he probe,” providing a more active valence to his search for like-minded beings with which to commune.
83 Baldick uses an English idiom here. The original line: “maintenant qu’il devait faire peau neuve” translates more directly as “now that he had to make a new skin.” (Mauldon translates as “now that he was going to make a completely fresh start” (177).
what is fleeting,” Des Esseintes’ private collection spiritually transforms him, providing a new context for his initial description of the space as a “snugly heated arc” (8) [“une arche immobile et tiède” (prol.)]. Rather than maintaining his identity in stasis as he intended, Des Esseintes’ collection serves as an incubatory vessel for a regenerated self.

**The Picture of Dorian Gray**

On the same day Dorian Gray discovers that his portrait will bear the physiological effects of his aging and immoral behaviour while his body remains unscathed, his eyes fall on a yellow book that his friend Henry has left for him. Dorian quickly becomes absorbed by the “novel without a plot” written with “metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as subtle in colour” that focuses on a “certain young Parisian” (104). When a contemporary of Wilde’s asked him which book it was that had so captivated Gray in the novel, the author acknowledged the debt to Huysmans’s *A rebours*.84

But it is Dorian’s *mis*reading of this book—or more accurately, the ways in which Wilde rewrites *À rebours*—that reveals the metaphysical crux informing Dorian’s tragic fate. As Michael Shea notes, such rewritings serve to “expan[d] and shif[t] the focus of its exemplar” (118). Although to Dorian, “the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (105), he does not follow Des Esseintes’ development from radical individualism to queered subjectivity. The source of Dorian Gray’s failure can be ascertained from one of the text’s “re-writings” of *À rebours*. Dorian notes that he is more fortunate than the yellow book’s hero because “He never knew—never, indeed, had any cause to know—that somewhat grotesque dread of mirrors, and polished metal surfaces, and still water, which came upon the young Parisian so early in his life, and which was occasioned by the

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84 On the fascinating history of Wilde’s relationship to *À rebours* and his various acknowledgements and denials about its influence on Dorian Gray (both the character and the book), see G. A. Cevasco’s chapter “Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray” in *The Breviary of the Decadence: J. K. Huysmans’s A Rebons and English Literature* (AMS Press, 2001), pp. 67-91.
sudden decay of a beauty that had once, apparently, been so remarkable.” Des Esseintes was neither noted for his beauty, nor did he evince any particular aversion to his reflection. The only time he examines his visage is after his prolonged illness has transformed him so dramatically that he “scarcely recognizes himself.” As noted in the section above, Des Esseintes’ changed physiognomy reflects his altered identity; the influence of his collection of religious objects and literature has turned him into a “lost soul” on the cusp of conversion, and he begs for some exterior force to complete the process so that he may be complete it. In contrast, and as a result of his portrait’s strange magic, Dorian’s body is impermeable to such external influences; he cannot “drift along the stream” even if this is what he wished.

Wilde’s text pushes the material determinism of À rebours even further, portraying a universe in which the effects of seemingly intangible ideas are rendered as physical stigma that show themselves upon one’s physiognomy—where, in the artist Basil Hallward’s words, vices show themselves “in the lines of [a man’s] mouth, the droop of his eyelids the moulding of his hands, even” (126). But Dorian’s unchanging physiognomy has rendered him invulnerable to stigma, both physical and social. He first realizes his constitutional insensibility when he reflects that Sybil Vane’s suicide fails to affect him “as it should” (84). In Paterian terms, the effect of Dorian’s wish that his body never change has encased his hardened, “flawless” self behind a “thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced” (Pater 119). At the end of his life, Dorian blames Sir Henry’s yellow book for “poisoning” him, but Henry blithely contradicts such scapegoating: “As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. It is superbly sterile” (180). Sir Henry espouses a philosophy in which the materiality of the world—even one’s own physiognomy—is but raw material for enlightened individuals to work upon. Having taken to heart his decadent friend’s declaration that the aim of life is to “realize
one’s nature perfectly,” Dorian dedicates his life to his own “self-development” (19), which he supports through the collection and manipulation of other entities.

And yet, much like in À rebours, The Picture of Dorian Gray highlights its interest in engaging with the century’s psychological debates about the essence of identity early in the text. In the second chapter, Dorian declares that he feels the portrait Basil has painted of him is “a part of myself,” to which Basil flippantly responds, “[w]ell, as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself” (27). Basil’s statement lampoons the notion of selfhood as a singular, embodied phenomenon, but it also foreshadows the worn-out Dorian’s declaration at the end of the novel that the soul is “a terrible reality. It can be bought, and sold, and bartered away. It can be poisoned, or made perfect” (177). In the text’s experimentations with the extremes of materialist thought, Catholic psychomachia (“soul war”) over one’s eternal fate is reduced to the processes of commodity exchange, collection, and classification.

As in Huysmans’s novel, Dorian Gray leaves ambiguous the question of whether its protagonist is an autonomous, willful individual or whether his personality is predetermined by inherited structures. He is initially presented as a blank slate. “Your mysterious young friend … never thinks. … He is some brainless, beautiful creature” (7), Sir Henry contends in the first chapter: Dorian, he’s certain, is a naïf “unspotted from the world” (17) who can be readily spoiled by Henry’s corruptive influences. But the narrative also introduces materialist theories of psychology, evident most directly in Henry’s assertion that “life is a question of nerves, and fibres, and slowly built-up cells in which thought hides itself” (178-9). Dorian’s family history is replete with beautiful individuals engaging in cruel, excessive behaviours. Lord Henry learns from his uncle that Dorian’s grandfather was “a mean dog” (32) who, rumour has it, had his daughter’s lover (and Dorian’s father) killed. The lineage suggests that Dorian’s moral apathy
and maliciousness are inbred, and the influence of Sir Henry and the Yellow Book on his behaviour is negligible. Even Basil, who praises Dorian’s “simple and … beautiful nature” (17), admits that he can be “horribly thoughtless, and seems to take a real delight in giving me pain” (14). At the height of his quest for self-reification, Dorian ironically embraces a deterministic model of personhood:

He used to wonder at the shallow psychology of those who conceive the Ego in man as a thing simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence. To him, man was a being with myriad lives and myriad sensations, a complex multiform creature that bore within itself strange legacies of thought and passion, and whose very flesh was tainted with the monstrous maladies of the dead. He loves to stroll through the gaunt cold picture-gallery of his country house and look at the various portraits of those whose blood flowed through his veins. (120)

Dorian’s contradictory interpretation seemingly rejects the concept of identity as “simple, permanent, reliable, and of one essence” and proclaims that individuals are an amalgam of ancestral lives and deeds. But in focusing on hereditary inheritances, he makes no mention of present-day stimuli; he is a “multiform creature” who is still, in his estimation, locked into a cluster of inherited traits that are invulnerable to environmental influence—a vital component of nineteenth-century materialist conceptions of human psychology noticeably missing from Dorian’s philosophy. Later, he extensively contemplates what aspects of his identity he has acquired from his ancestors, considering, for instance, whether he has inherited “sin and shame” from one of his infamously adulterous progenitors. He never considers the effects of his home, though it is full of memories of his lonely childhood and hateful grandfather, or even the influences of his present-day acquaintances, though he had previously wondered if Basil’s love “could have saved him” (99). Precisely because of the portrait’s magic, Dorian’s trajectory through life becomes wholly fixed by predetermining influences. The novel symbolizes its protagonist’s insensitivity to outside influence when Dorian shuts up his portrait in an attic room behind “elaborate bars” (118).
Having reasoned that his sociopathy is inherited and therefore unalterable, Dorian sets out to celebrate his personality through the collection of objects that reflect his own self-image. In direct imitation of “the French protagonist,” Dorian collects exotic, finely-honed goods, but his habits of acquisition have a much more imperialistic flavour. Dorian’s collections include the “strangest instruments … from all parts of the world,” particularly from “dead nations or among … savage tribes” (111). He also plunders the East for textiles: “dainty Delhi muslins … Dacca gauzes … strange figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings … Sicilian brocades … Japanese Fokousas” (116). Dorian’s most extensive collection is made up of jewellery and the third-person narrator’s shift away from Dorian’s interior thoughts to descriptions of gem lore directly mimics À rebours’ narrative movements during its extensive lists of Des Esseintes’ possessions. But unlike in À rebours, the narrator’s enumeration of various jewels and their histories does not concatenate into a compelling “life” of its own. Instead, the descriptions maintain a catalogue-like quality—unsurprising, given that Wilde lifted passages directly from various museum catalogues and handbooks. The effect is that the jewels themselves remain inert, functioning as metonyms of Dorian’s homosexuality. When the narrator shifts attention from the jewels themselves to their human possessors, the descriptions are equally indexical:

When the Duke de Valentinois, son of Alexander VI, visited Louis XII of France, his horse was loaded with gold leaves … Charles of England had ridden in stirrups hung with four hundred and twenty-one diamonds. Richard II had a coat, valued at thirty thousand marks … Edward II gave to Piers Gaveston a suit of red-gold armour studded with jacinths … Henry II wore jewelled gloves, reaching to the elbow. (114)

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85 Huysmans later criticized his own chapter on gems in À rebours for being “lifeless,” which he contributes to his pre-conversion state: “I do not for a moment deny that a beautiful emerald may be admired for its sparks that glitter in the fire of its green water, but if one is unaware of the language of symbols, is it not a silent stranger with whom one cannot converse and who is herself silent because we cannot understand her speech? But she is more and better than that” (Baldick 210).

86 Gillespie notes that Wilde culled much of Dorian’s collection from various South Kensington Museum Art Handbooks, “sometimes verbatim” (112n4).
As Michael Patrick Gillespie notes, the historical figures listed are “notorious homosexuals” (114n6), which serves to reflect their collector’s own crystallizing same-sex preferences.

Unlike Des Esseintes, Dorian maintains a grammatically active position over his collection: “He had collected … He loved … He procured … he investigated … He longed to … he sought … he had stored away” (114-16). Dorian’s project of self-reification also requires the colonization of people, and like Des Esseintes, he delights in “corrupt[ing] everyone with whom [he] becomes intimate” (128). As Basil notes, “one has a right to judge a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity” (127). The narrator’s description of Dorian’s collections weaves in accounts of his deleterious influence on the people around him, chiefly “young men of his own rank who were his chief companions” (118). Both objects and people have been colonized by Dorian’s identity and transformed into contorted reflections of his personality.

The narrator’s description of Dorian’s favourite chapter from the “French book” reveals how strongly the character associates the reification of self with mastering other beings. The narrator explains that, in the seventh chapter, the hero dresses himself as infamously despotic (and debauched) rulers: Caligula, Domitian, and “Gian Maria Visconti, who used hounds to chase living men” (122). The actual seventh chapter of À rebours, in contrast, contains Des Esseintes’ acknowledgement that he is beginning to lose control over himself—that despite his efforts, his surroundings are altering his identity. The contrast between the real and imagined seventh chapters highlights the main difference between the protagonists in both novels: one transforms objects into extensions of his idealized self-image; the other attempts to do the same, but is instead transformed by his possessions.

In The Picture of Dorian Gray, as in À rebours, homosexuality is a symptom of degeneration, with every suggestion of same-sex activity treated with eroticized Gothic horror.
The one notable exception is Basil Hallward, whose adoration of Dorian is much more obvious in the earlier Lippincott version of the text:

It is quite true that I have worshipped you with far more romance of feeling than a man usually gives to a friend. Somehow, I had never loved a woman. ... Well, from the moment I met you, your personality had the most extraordinary influence over me. I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly. ... When I was away from you, you were still present in my art. (250)

Basil’s love for Dorian reflects a willingness to have his personality subsumed, an openness to having the distinctions between self and Other eradicated that is echoed in his spirituality.  

Perhaps even more than in À rebours, queer ontology—the flattening of distinctions between subject and object, self and other—is represented in Wilde’s text by Catholicism. In contrast to Henry’s pseudo-Paterian philosophy of self-development, Basil willingly embraces self-abnegation. He confesses to Henry that he had “always been [his] own master” (10) until he met Dorian. His love for the young man transforms him. Basil declares, “As long as I live, the personality of Dorian Gray will dominate me” (15). However, in yielding to Dorian’s influence the results are not corrupting but creative. Basil asserts that “[Dorian’s] personality has suggested to me an entirely new manner of art, an entirely new mode of style” (13). In contrast to Dorian’s seductions of other men, which inevitably ruin them, Basil’s willing submission to Dorian generates exquisite art, and it is only when Dorian curtails their relationship that Basil’s creative force fades. Basil is also the most notably Christian character in the text, convinced of not only the spiritual but also the material reality of sin that “writes itself across a man’s face” (126).

When Basil learns of Dorian’s secret metamorphosing portrait, he urges him to “confess” and pray with him for forgiveness, and attempts to rally him from despair with a Bible verse that emphasizes God’s transformative powers in materialistic terms: “Though your sins be as scarlet, yet I will make them as white as snow” (Isaiah 1.18).

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87 Basil’s theology appears to be of a slightly lapsed High Church variety. When he suggests to Harry that one might pay a “terrible price” for living selfishly, Harry responds, “medieval art is charming but medieval emotions are out-of-date” (67).
While Dorian seeks out people and things that he can manipulate, he shows a demonstrable avoidance of being himself influenced. He avoids making lasting bonds with other characters, and has a Des Esseintes-like horror of coming into contact with other bodies, particularly noticeable in his command to both Sybil Vane and Basil Hallward at different points in the narrative: “Don’t touch me!” Dorian’s attitude embodies Sir Henry’s assertion that “to be good is to be in harmony with one’s self” and “discord is to be forced to be in harmony with others” (67). After Basil confesses his feelings for Dorian, the protagonist reflects that the concept that someone else could “fill him with strange idolatry” (96) is completely alien to him. Later, when Basil insists that they chasten themselves and beg God for forgiveness together, Dorian flies into a murderous rage. But his avoidance of others does not mean he is satisfied with his own company. The narrator reveals that “everything that he collected in his lovely house” was intended as “modes by which he could escape” (117). As the years go by, Dorian feels increasingly trapped by his own unchanging physicality, which, in the highly materialistic logic of the text, means his identity is similarly fixed. He dabbles in opium to “buy oblivion” (153) for a few hours, and he admits to Sir Henry that his “personality has become a burden” (169), and that he should “like to be somebody else” (125). He even, belatedly, attempts to change his ways, cutting off a sexual dalliance with a village girl in order to (he tells himself and Henry) protect her innocence. But, as Sir Henry points out, his behaviour demonstrates exactly the kind of egotistical aestheticization in which Dorian has always framed his destructive behavior. Henry mocks Dorian’s description of the scene of the girl’s heartbreak, which Dorian describes as a tryst in “this wonderful May” with his “Perdita” of “garden mint and marigold” (173) by pointing out the reality of the situation:

Do you think this girl will ever be really contented with any one of her own rank? I suppose she will be married some day to a rough carter or a grinning ploughman. Well, the fact of having met you, and loved you, will teach her to despise her husband, and she will be wretched. … Besides, how do you know
Hetty isn’t floating at the present moment in some star-lit mill-pond, with lovely water-lilies around her, like Ophelia? (174)

Sir Henry laughingly admonishes: “[f]rom a moral point of view, I cannot say that I think much of your great renunciation.” But Dorian still hopes that he can control the terms of his self-transformation: “Perhaps if his life became pure, he would be able to expel every sign of evil passion from the face [of his portrait]” (182). But when he sees that his portrait is as hideous looking as ever, but now with “the curved wrinkle of the hypocrite” on its mouth, Dorian’s realizes that his desired spiritual transformation is impossible unless reverses the portrait’s effects.

In other words, Dorian’s only salvation is to allow the borders of his selfhood to be permeated, which would require undoing the effects of the portrait and corporeally taking on a lifetime of maladies, stigmas, and intoxicants. The possibility of this option is couched in the idiom of the Catholic sacrament of Penance: for the soul to be made pure, he must manifest its corruption through confession. When Dorian contemplates the red stain on his portrait’s fingers, he wonders: “Was he really to confess?” (183). 88 He refuses, noting that since all physical evidence of Basil’s murder has been eradicated, “the world would simply say that he was mad,” avoiding the fact that undoing the spell of the portrait would inscribe all the “evidence” needed onto his transformed body. Instead, Dorian’s destruction of his portrait—his final act of will—exposes his commitment to Henry’s declaration that he is, and will always remain, “quite flawless” (178).

It is useful at this point to briefly consider the ontology of the entity that has placed Dorian in his supernatural condition: his portrait. As I have been arguing throughout, “things” in the Victorian era tended to emerge out of imperialist notions about subject sovereignty, which depended on a universe of “tamed” objects. Dorian’s portrait, whose purpose, “aliveness,” and

88 Lippincott version: “Confess? Did it mean he was to confess?” (301). The sense that the portrait is functioning as a sort of Divine messenger is much more evident in this earlier version.
relationship to Dorian is at the heart of the novel’s notorious generic ambiguity, is an emblem of Victorian thinghood which, in eluding systems of containment, brings attention the existence of those systems. The portrait has permitted Dorian to fulfill his culture’s fantasies of unfettered mastery in ways that are deliberately presented as grotesque, and the hideous self-image it reflects back to Dorian anticipates, as I argue in my final chapter, the discomfort certain colonial artifacts inspired in British imperialists. In both cases, the unexpected visibility of certain things forces characters to confront the violence created by the culture’s acquisitive forms of identity formation.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have endeavoured to reconsider depictions of subject-object fluidity in two texts, *À rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I interpret their similarities in content not as variations on the same theme, but as providing contrapuntal examples of the same “lesson” about queer ontology. That lesson can be gleaned from the texts’ shared focus on Catholic concepts of sanctifying grace: the supernatural action of God’s love penetrating one’s soul. The doctrinal paradox of an individual becoming renewed and elevated through infiltration of the self by the Other is similarly captured in one of John Donne’s most famous Catholic sonnets, “Batter my heart, three-person’d God,” in which the speaker begs for God to “ravish” him so that he can be made “chaste.” At the end of both novels, the protagonists have the same choice: self-annihilation or the transformation of the self through the influence of a (possibly divinely permeated) object or objects. Dorian Gray chooses self-annihilation; Des Esseintes’ choice is left

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89 Joyce Carol Oates, for instance, considers the novel to be “a curious hybrid. Certainly it possesses a ‘supernatural’ dimension, and its central image is Gothic; yet in other respects it is Restoration comedy” (427). Other critics consider the novel to be a parable, arguing, like Joseph Pearce, that it “illuminates the grave spiritual dangers involved in a life of immoral action and experiment” (164). Shelton Waldrep, meanwhile, interprets Dorian Gray as a realist novel, noting that “Wilde had to work within the confines of some specific variation on the theme of realism” (103). Rachel Bowlby summarizes the generic confusion in “Promoting Dorian Gray”: the novel, she states, is an amalgam of “innumerable different forms and styles … alternating and overlapping in no particular order and with no … appearance of either a conventional linear narrative in the mode of realism, or a consistent symbolic line in the mode of allegory” (190).
ambiguous. The fates of both protagonists, however, implies that marginalized subjects must
discover more fluid, less imperialistic methods of being-in-the-world, which, in the nineteenth
century, had yet to be fully articulated.

Recently, queer scholars have imported the concerns of thing theory and other studies of
object ontology to work through how non-humans contribute to anti-normative subject
formation. For the protagonists of both
Victorian novels, their collections act to
manifest a non-normative identity. But the
protagonists’ collections also have the
potential to *transform* their identities, and it is
an acceptance of the perpetual give-and-take
between queer being and becoming that leads
one protagonist to doom and the other to
potential salvation.

In contrast to the protagonists’ fear of losing mastery, both over themselves and their
*milieu* (particularly with regards to Des Esseintes’ disdain for “nature”), consider the work of
queer photographer Laura Aguilar’s series, *Grounded* (2006-07) (Fig. 7). Her photographs treat
the human body—in her case, one that is racialized, obese, and female—as just another feature
within a natural landscape. Luciano and Chen contend that Aguilar’s photos link marginalized
subjects to the land, not just symbolically but materially, conveying an “intimate and physical
connection to the nonhuman” (186):

> Aguilar seems to mold her body into an echo of the boulder behind her—the pose
> concealing sex and gender, obscuring race, and making even her status as human
difficult, at first, to discern … the female body refuses either to open itself to
appropriation by the viewer or to position itself as the object of the male gaze. But by turning away from the demand for recognition within
the circle of humanity. By mimicking a boulder, Aguilar enters the very
nonhuman fold where some would place her, effectively displacing the centrality
of the human itself. (184)

Such an interpretation is reflective of a wider paradigm shift in the academic world towards
questioning the regime of the human. Movements like object-oriented ontology, actor-network
type, animal studies, ecocriticism, queer inhumanisms, speculative realism, and critical ethnic
studies share a conviction that the modern habit of “stratifying demarcations and taxonomies of
being” (Muñoz 210) has unduly limited the horizon of critical thought, and with it, the scope of
ethical consideration in ways that have proven to be exclusionary and destructive.90 To cultivate
what Mao describes as an “extrasubjective integrity” (10), or what Latour calls the human being
as anthropos: the “weaver of morphisms” (137), requires, as it does for Des Esseintes and Dorian
Gray, a rejection of liberal humanist forms of identity formation that idealize, above all, the
notion of subject sovereignty.

As this dissertation argues, however, to even conceive of an alternative to our inherited
structures of selfhood, it is vital to examine the culture in which that metaphysical scaffolding
was erected. Not only do representations of the stable, coherent liberal subject meet their
apotheosis in the nineteenth-century novel, but, as these novels demonstrate, it is also where
alternatives to that model begin to assert themselves. They present, however obliquely, the
possibility of toppling the walls of ego and permitting “non-you entities to take the lead”
(Morton and Guðmundsdóttir) in ways that do not simply dissolve identity but potentially
reconstitute and augment it.

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90 In “Life of Plants,” Michael Pollan reports on a group of scientists that explore the “possible homologies between
neurobiology and phytobiology”; that is, the possibility that plants are “capable of cognition, communication,
information processing, computation, learning, and memory,” arguing that these abilities have been too alien for
traditionally anthropomorphic epistemologies to recognize.
“It Seemed to Smile in Mockery”:
African Statues and the Imperial Rhetoric of “Thinghood”

“... [T]he face presents itself, and demands justice.”
—Emmanuel Levinas

In “Empire and Objecthood,” W. J. T. Mitchell argues that empires create specific discourses of object-mastery: entities that “awaken a certain suspicion or doubt about the reliability of [an empire’s] categories” (159) are treated as “bad” objects to be “neutralized, tolerated, or merely destroyed” (146). According to Mitchell, the pre-Enlightenment imperial response to “bad” objects was typically to destroy them. In the British Empire (and other modern European powers like France and Belgium), which was endeavouring to organize the information gathered from the far-flung corners of its colonies into a comprehensive, unitary archive, those entities were instead sorted into premeditated categories and circulated within familiar networks of distribution, consumption, and exhibition.

When encountering ancient monuments of Africa, however, such as the legendary Sphinx of Giza, Victorian travellers such as Alexander Kingslake often temporarily put aside their “objectivism”—what Mitchell describes as “a picture of the beholder as imperial, imperious consciousness, capable of surveying and ordering the entire object world” (157). In his extended contemplation of the colossal monument in the enormously popular travelogue Eothen,

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92 For Mitchell, the names an empire gives the objects of the Other depends on its collective fantasies about the colonized Other’s mindset. Idols “correspond to the old territorial form of imperialism that moves by conquest or colonization” (159) and denotes objects that may appear as rivals to one’s own god or emperor. The word fetish circulates in mercantile empires, who regard the fetish with “contempt” and evidence of the user’s “incredibly backward, primitive, savage mind” (161) but tolerate its use for the purposes of trade. Finally is the totem, arising out of anthropology to denote Western concepts of tribal thought. “While idolatry and fetishism were generally condemned as obscene, perverse, demonic belief systems to be stamped out, totemism usually has been characterized as a kind of childish naïveté, based on an innocent oneness with nature” (162).
Kingslake frequently takes on the diction of a True Believer in the thrall of an idol: “You dare not mock the Sphinx” (167), he warns at the conclusion of the chapter.

Though treating ancient Egyptian monuments as god-like beings might seem to be indulging in precisely the kind of superstitious thinking that Victorians typically attributed to “primitive” populations, it provided a unique solution to the problem of assimilating objects whose sophisticated manufacture challenged Victorian ideas about the abject savagery of Africans. The ancient statuary of Egypt, much of which was transported to England during the nineteenth century, symbolized the British Empire’s status as the ascendant global power. But the statues also functioned as a nodal point for imperial anxieties about racial and cultural miscegenation. If, as philosopher David Hume infamously insisted, “there never was any civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even an individual eminent either in action or speculation,” how were Victorians to account for the existence of sophisticated cultural artifacts whose anthropomorphic features were, in the parlance of the day, “negroid”?93 As I argue in this chapter, by depicting the statues as watchful but mute remnants of a vanished civilization—by rhetorically transforming them into “things” whose singularity seems to evade epistemological capture—the Victorian texts examined in this chapter sever the artifacts’ connections to their original makers as well as to the contemporary geographical, historical, and cultural networks in which they reside.94 In doing so, they provide evidence for what Homi Bhabha describes as colonial discourse’s “process of domination through disavowal” (112). Victorian depictions of statues as potentially supernatural beings are not simply examples of

93 Hume famously revised the footnote of the essay “Of National Characters.” The first edition: “I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation.” Revised: “I am apt to suspect negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely was a civilized nation of that complexion, nor even any individual eminent either in action of speculation.” Source: Andrew Valls’s chapter “A Lousy Empirical Scientist,” in Reconsidering Hume’s Racism in Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy, edited by Valls (Cornell UP, 2005), p. 133.
94 “Singularity escapes the logic of parts and wholes, of cultural systems of exchange where elements gain significance from being weighed against each other within the parameters of a broader structure” (Ruti 2).
what McClure describes as Western culture’s desire to preserve the colonial frontier as the locus of “magic, mystery and disorder” (8). They also highlight particular cultural objects whose assimilation into normative circuits of consumption and exhibition may require careful mediation to ensure their presence doesn’t undermine imperial ideologies.

I have argued that “things”—what Bill Brown describes as entities that seem to “lie beyond the grid of intelligibility” (“Thing Theory” 5)—were especially galling to the Victorians. Their culture’s imaginative patterns reveal pervasive fantasies about a world populated by inert, comprehensible objects that could be reworked to manifest some identity—individual or national. But when encountering examples of African material culture in particular, imperials frequently engaged in what I’m calling the “rhetoric of thinghood”: a means of cognitively disregarding an object’s material history, which often challenged Eurocentric narratives regarding the “rise of civilization.” For example, before concluding his meditation on the Sphinx by describing it as a god-like being, Kingslake veers through a number of imperial responses to “bad” objects that Mitchell describes in his chapter. He gives voice to his feelings of repulsion by claiming that the Sphinx must be a “deformity and monster” to all members of “our generation” (167). He then pivots, describing the Sphinx’s “lips, so thick and heavy” as being similar to those of the local Copt girls, “who kiss your charitable hand with big pouting lips.” The statue is no longer repulsive and instead becomes beguiling because he connects its features to his erotic fantasies about Egypt’s women. But in connecting the Egyptian Sphinx’s features to an ethno-religious group that was classified as African, Kingslake contributes to a problem for Victorian narratives of world history, which had effectively written most African people out of the story of civilization.95 Kingslake’s worshipful exaltation allows him to circumvent these

95 As Robert Bernasconi lays out in “Black Skin, White Skulls: The Nineteenth Century Debate over the Racial Identity of Ancient Egyptians” (in Parallax, vol. 3, no. 2, April 2007 pp. 6-20), though generally the Copts were believed to be possible descendants of the pharoanic people, nineteenth-century European constructions of their race
complications: “Laugh and mock if you will at the worship of stone idols, but mark ye this,” Kingslake warns, “the stone idol bears awful semblance of Deity.” By portraying the Sphinx as an omnipresent being that has surveyed the unfolding of Egypt’s many invasions with “tranquil mien” (167), Kingslake implies that the statue is equally disconnected from the colonial fates of the region’s current inhabitants.

At first glance, the era’s frequent depictions of animate African statues might therefore appear to be an example of what Anne McClintock calls racial fetishism: the act of displacing “what the modern imagination could not incorporate into the invented domain of the primitive” (182) onto an object that the fetishist was compelled to continually revisit. But the power of the fetish—what makes it, in Freud’s term, a “token of triumph”—is its ability to embody an impossible irresolution without requiring conscious acknowledgement of that disavowal. From an imperial standpoint, the fetish should allow its beholder to sidestep the cognitive work of repressing facts that run counter to Eurocentric models of progress. In contrast, the Victorians’ recorded encounters with Africa’s statues, both factual and fictional, often do not fit neatly into their texts’ systems of representation. Instead, they are examples of the kinds of highly charged literary portrayals of aversion to the Other.

The rhetoric of thinghood therefore arises out of the same anxieties over object-insurgency that contributed to the nineteenth-century concept of fetishism. For Marx, the origin of the commodity as a product of human labour was obscured from the consumer by capitalist modes of production, the concealment of which infused the commodity with its curiously “magical” presence. By the turn of the century, Freud had adapted Marx’s concept of a subject-object relationship dependent on the erasure of the object’s history by transforming it into a form of cognitive defense in which the subject unconsciously deflects the fetish’s traumatic origins. In

shifted according to the ideological convictions of the author, running the gamut from “Negroid”, to Indian, to “as fair as the Europeans” (10), if not definitively white.
the texts investigated in the chapter, on the other hand, the erasure of an object’s history is both conscious and strategic: a response triggered by an artifact’s metonymic connection to contemporary black Africans—particularly with respect to ancient statues, whose anthropomorphic features in particular conflicted with Victorian concepts of black Africans as having “no culture, no civilization, no ‘long historical past’” (Fanon 17).

Like fetishism, therefore, the rhetoric of thinghood is a discursive strategy to neutralize the threatening multiplicity of a thing that resists modern forms of categorical containment. In the case of fetishism, the thing is transformed into what McClintock calls an “impassioned object” (184). Within the rhetoric of thinghood, a thing is transformed into what could be called an “impossible object”: its “meaning” is treated as being epistemologically unattainable, even if its social history is potentially accessible to European modes of inquiry.

Though the rhetoric of thinghood is able provisionally to neutralize the statues’ imperially disruptive energies, in point of fact it demarcates a moment when the speaker is actively confronted with the instability of his or her own knowledge system. In this chapter, I examine H. Rider Haggard’s She (1886) and H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine (1895) as representative examples of this phenomenon, as both novels depict statues whose very presence unsettles the confident “objectivity” of the protagonists: what Mitchell calls “that open, curious, unresolved frame of mind that makes the encounter with novel, alien realities possible and desirable” (157). As I further explore, in response to the disruption of imperial sovereignty, the protagonists take on, however briefly, a more defensive and xenophobic mindset. These readings are contextualized within the British Empire’s attempts to historically account for Egyptian monuments like Younger Memnon, and later in the century, the impressive bronze statues of Benin City, according to Victorian misunderstandings of the racial hierarchy of civilizations.
Objects of Empire

The installation of the gargantuan bust of Younger Memnon in the British Museum in January 1819 inspired Percy Shelley’s famous sonnet, “Ozymandias.” But as Elliot Colla’s research into the statue’s history reveals, following the fanfare of its arrival, curators were “at a loss” over what to do with it, unsure of how to position the bust and other ancient Egyptian pieces in relation to the museum’s existing collections (47). In the early nineteenth century, European ideas of world history were still influenced by Christian hermeneutics, especially St. Augustine’s insistence that Christian telos is “driven providentially” towards a “rapturous conclusion” (Gange 18). Ancient pagan societies such as Egypt and Syria, meanwhile, were “condemned to existence in cyclical time”: they were “repetitive and unproductive” cultures that had produced little more than monstrous idolatries.

In the early decades of the century, the museum’s collection of Egyptian antiquities was placed separately from its main exhibits, which was structured to trace the progress of Western civilization from its Greco-Roman roots to its apogee in contemporary England. Contemporary ignorance of ancient Egyptian language and history contributed to the collections’ outsider status, causing visitors to approach it as a site of “wonder and mystery” (Colla 50). The 1832 Egyptian Antiquities guidebook (published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge) remarks that the stranger who visits the “curious collection of [Egyptian] objects”

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96 I met a traveller from an antique land,  
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone  
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,  
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,  
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,  
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read  
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;  
And on the pedestal, these words appear:  
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;  
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”
will be “struck” by their “singular forms and colossal size” but will experience “at first, no pleasing impression” (British Museum 1:4). Aesthetically, ancient Egyptian statues fell outside of Classical conventions, not only in their highly formalized poses but also in their non-white features, making their value equally difficult to parse out according to European understandings of artistic excellence. The incompleteness of the Egyptian antiquities’ assimilation spurs a longing for epistemological mastery in the guidebook’s author. He notes that the sculptures, with their “colossal dimensions” and “strange combinations of human and animal form,” evoke “an intense desire to know in what country, and in what age of the world, such marvellous specimens of human art were produced” (4-5; my emphasis).

At the same time, the 1832 guidebook exposes the racial tensions surrounding the museum’s resistance to assimilating Egyptian antiquities within existing narratives of world history. When considering the bust of Younger Memnon, the guidebook dwells on its “African” features:

Memnon may be called beautiful, though it has not the European form … Though it is not the negro face, we cannot help feeling, as we look upon it, that its features recall to our minds that kind of outline which we understand by the term African, a word that means, in ordinary acceptation, something of the negro cast of face. (1:9-11)

The indeterminacy of Younger Memnon’s racial features—they are and are not “negro”—reflects ancient Egypt’s ambiguous status within the museum itself as both culturally advanced and abjectly barbaric.97

Egypt’s colossal statues constituted a unique challenge to the Victorian conceptions of racial difference which, even before Darwin’s theory of evolution, were beginning to be

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97 As Darcy Grigsby outlines in “Eroded Stone, Petrified Flesh, and the Sphinx of Race,” debates about the race of the Ancient Egyptians continue into the twenty-first century. “An American preoccupation with the racial polarization of black and white has rightly been criticized for imposing an overly schematic, binary template on a complex and distant history of peoples. Nonetheless, as Robert Bernasconi has recently pointed out [see note 95], while Egyptologists have been motivated to disprove Afrocentrist assertions that ancient Egyptians were black, they have not rushed to scorn the equally problematic unspoken identification of ancient Egyptians with whiteness. Such is the ideological power of the unmarked and unspoken” (21-2). See Parallax, vol. 13, no. 2, 2007, pp. 21-40.
classified “in rigidly hierarchical and even polygenetic terms” (Stocking 64). The physiognomic features of Egypt’s statues—which nearly a century of empiricist approaches that “encouraged the tabulation of perceivable differences” (Goldberg 28) had made the Victorians particularly sensitive to—bore the markings of the racialized Other. The admiration the Victorians felt for ancient Egypt’s technological, spiritual sophistication, and political eminence in the ancient world, was countered by Enlightenment pseudo-biological categories of racial difference that insisted upon the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic inferiority of non-whites. The guidebook couches these racial anxieties in aesthetic terms, anticipating that the “stiff, ugly” (2:1) appearances of the Egyptian figures make them a difficult source of visual edification. In response to this potential difficulty, the author encourages the museum visitor to contemplate the sculptures with an attitude of cosmopolitan relativism, thereby avoiding the task of situating the statuary within Eurocentric frameworks of human history. In its introduction to Egyptian statuary, the guidebook author explains that although for many individuals “ideas of blackness and ugliness are inseparable,” the visitor must understand that the statue’s features may be “looked on with pleasure by a large part of that branch of the human race to which the English nation belongs.” In the second volume of the same guidebook, however, a description of another statue states: “[i]f it is a specimen of an Egyptian woman, there need no longer be any doubt that the Egyptians, or at least the higher castes among them, belonged to a family entirely distinct from any of the so-called inferior races” (2:14). The discourse surrounding the statues is highly unstable, shifting between abolitionist rhetoric about a single human family to polygenist concepts of black Africans as a separate slave-race depending on the particular attributes of a given artifact.98

98 Polygenesis was the theory that the diversity of the races was a result of separate origins, as opposed to monogenesis: the theory that races come from a single source (evolutionarily and/or from Adam and Eve). In fact, as Stocking demonstrates in *Victorian Anthropology*, polygenest and monogenesist hypotheses competed with one
Egyptian antiquities were eventually assimilated to Eurocentric accounts of the development of civilization, but their absorption also caused that history’s frame of reference to be recalibrated. Faced with undeniable evidence of a sophisticated pre-Classical civilization, the position of ancient Egypt eventually shifted in Victorian historical frameworks from a mysterious Eastern curiosity to the progenitor of civilization itself. In contrast to the 1832 guidebook, the museum’s *Gallery of Antiquities* catalogue, published over a decade later, commences its historical narrative in Egypt, the logic being that it is “the source from which the arts of Sculpture and Painting, and perhaps even the Sciences, were handed to the Greeks—from Greeks to us.” The “stock ancient Egyptian imagery of the grotesque and barbaric” was replaced by a “more homely, civilized, biblical Egypt” (Gange 41).

In comparison with the older guidebook, the 1844 *Gallery of Antiquities* makes no reference to the racial characteristics of Younger Memnon (now confidently identified as Ramses II) or of the other statuary in the collection. Instead of considering the facial features of the bust, the catalogue lists the now-familiar conventions of pharoanic imagery and provides a translation of the hieroglyphics carved into the sculpture’s back, which had been undecipherable only a decade before. The descriptions convey England’s epistemological mastery of Egypt, showing the nation’s “positivist confidence” (Colla 66) in its ability to consolidate colonial artifacts within a coherent historical narrative.

The catalogue’s newfound silence on the racial characteristics of Egyptian sculpture does not speak to a Victorian embrace of racial diversity. Rather, given the mid-century resurgence of polygenesist models of ethnography, whose proponents frequently claimed that black Africans another throughout the nineteenth century. Though the acquisition of knowledge was popularly imagined to be unitary and cumulative, there was no scientific consensus about the origins of humankind in the Victorian era.

99 Egypt’s recalibration within the West’s story of civilization even encompassed religious frameworks. As Gange points out, many excavations were directly funded by the Church of England, who hoped to find the original Exodus route and thereby connect ancient Egypt to Christian telos.

100 See Andrew Robinson’s *Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion* (Oxford UP, 2012) for a detailed history of European efforts to decipher ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, as well as a survey of its impact on studies in Egyptology.
were a sub-species of humanity incapable of producing even the most rudimentary of civilizations, the omission provides a prologue to the strategic elisions and denials that would increasingly inflect imperial depictions of African material culture. Ideas of evolutionary anthropology in the middle of the century were strongly influenced by the work of “American school” antebellum ethnologists. Proponents such as Samuel Morton and George Gliddon helped to establish what Martin Bernal describes as the “Revised Aryan model” of ancient Egypt into nineteenth-century thought. They argued that the ancient Egyptians “are not, and never were, Africans, still less Negroes” (Gliddon 32), and if there were any “negroes” in ancient Egypt, they were “servants and slaves” (S. Morton 66). Likewise, the 1844 catalogue avoids discussions of the racial characteristics of the pharaohs while simultaneously attempting to tease out the race of Egypt’s slaves and prisoners. The text laments at one point that lists of the pharaoh Amounopt III’s captured prisoners, found on various statues and columns housed in British and French museums, are silent as to “the race to which each prisoner belonged” (British Museum 83): as a result “it is at present unclear” whether they were “Asiatic or black” (84).

In *Victorian Anthropology*, George Stocking explains that as the century wore on and science took over many of the ideological functions of religion, “savages” were no longer considered merely “morally delinquent or spiritually deluded, but racially incapable” (237). In other words, their presumed inferiorities or intellect and morality were thought to be biologically determined.  

As a result, Egyptian antiquities became an ever more potent site of epistemological anxiety. Nicholas Daly and Alexandra Warwick, for instance, point to the *fin-de-

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101 The idea of black Africans as being a separate “slave” race, though influential, was far from universal at any point in Victorian England. James Hunt, the founder of the Anthropological Society of London, published “The Negro’s Place in Nature,” described by Stocking as “the archetype of the traditional racist view of blacks” (251). In it, Hunt argues that blacks were incapable of civilization and were “better off as a slave in the Confederate States of America than as freeman in Sierra Leone.” It was greeted with “hisses and catcalls” (Lightman 218) when he delivered it at a British Association meeting in 1863. As Bernard Lightman notes, “his principal critic, William Craft, a fugitive African American slave, received enthusiastic cheers from the same audience.” Ultimately, only 250 copies of the essay were sold. Nonetheless, as Stocking notes, by the second half of the nineteenth century ideas of cultural difference were “so hopelessly enmeshed in the framework of biological evolutionism that men like Leslie Stevens had difficulty conceptualizing them except in terms of ‘race’” (143).
sècle “mummy fiction” craze and other relics-gone-wild thrillers as indicative of the Victorians’ unconscious fears of the return of the oppressed—the idea that colonial spoils could “live again, and … disturb the order of the present, and particularly the contemporary metropolis” (Warwick “City of Ressurections” 130).

It is out of this increasingly institutionalized insistence on the European roots of civilization that Haggard creates his imaginative fantasy of the “real” history of Africa, embodied in the Temple of Truth in the ancient ruins of Kôr, an advanced civilization of white Africans who, according to his novel, preceded the Egyptians by thousands of years.

The Statue of Truth

“Truth Standing on the World,” the name that the immortal white queen, Ayesha, gives the colossal statue at the heart of the ruins of Kôr functions, according to Norman Etherington, as “the central symbol” of H. Rider Haggard’s She (xvii). The statue is fashioned in the form of a winged figure perched on a giant sphere, with arms outstretched “like those of some woman about to embrace one she dearly loved, while her whole attitude gave an impression of the tenderest beseeching” (233). Her “perfect” body is naked “save … the face, which was thinly veiled.” Its inscription reads: “Is there no man that will draw my veil and look upon my face, for it is very fair? Unto him who draws my veil shall I be, and peace will I give him.” The statue’s plea conflates imperial ownership with sexual possession, presenting Africa in the form of a naked, blinded woman begging to be unveiled. The statue and the vanished culture it embodies also “corrects” the challenges that Egyptian sculpture created for Eurocentric concepts of civilization. The perfectly preserved corpses of the Kôr reveal that they were a civilization of blonde-haired white people, legitimizing imperial claims to African territory as a genealogical birthright. Ayesha, the immortal white queen who has resided in the ruins for two thousand years, also insists that Kôr’s civilization predates Egypt’s, and may have even fostered it: “Doth
it occur to thee,” she queries, “that [the Kôr] who sailed North may have been the fathers of the first Egyptians?” (164). The origins of civilization are fictionally reclaimed as Europe’s genealogical legacy.

In addition to representing the supremacy of the white race, the easily legible and aesthetically Westernized Statue of Truth symbolizes the novel’s imperial fantasies of one day obtaining a comprehensive order of things. Nearly every object that the protagonists encounter legitimizes their nation’s narratives of world progress, which, for all their variations, overwhelmingly place England at the zenith of human civilization. Holly’s archaeological expertise provides comparative examples to situate both the ancient civilization of Kôr and its current barbarous inhabitants, the Amahagger, within universalized ‘stages’ of culture. Kôr’s similarities to the ancient Egyptians allows him to make confident educated guesses about their culture, and confirmatory evidence piles up in the form of helpfully illustrative bas-reliefs and sculptures. Similarly, his assessments of the Amahagger’s material culture provide him with proof of their constitutional barbarity. Their “lamps of rude manufacture … formed of red earthenware pots” (83) foreshadows their “hot-pot” ceremony, in which they attempt to cook and eat the protagonists in similar vessels.

102 Though “savagery” and “barbarism” were used interchangeably to denote the uncivilized Other in the Western world for centuries, the Victorians attempted to stabilize the terms within a formal scientific discourse. Early anthropologists like Edward B. Tylor and Lewis H. Morgan arranged diverse cultural traits into universal “stages” of what was understood to be a unilateral progression of human culture. Tylor’s idea of human development—from savagery to barbarism to civilization—was modelled on Comte’s Law of Three Stages, which separated human cultures into progressive stages of religious belief—from animism to polytheism to monotheism. For Morgan, who added interstitial steps within the three stages of human development, human advancement was based on technological mastery: savages mastered fire-making and used bows and arrows; “lower” barbarians acquired pottery, “middle” barbarians had animal domestication and irrigated agriculture, and upper barbarians manufactured iron. Morgan defined “civilization” as the development of a phonetic alphabet. This schema placed the Egyptians at a lower “stage” of humanity than their alphabet-using contemporaries, the Greeks and Romans. In Morgan’s estimation, Egyptians almost became civilized, but lacked the “energy” needed to progress over that final, crucial hurdle of technological development. The hieroglyph of “the slow Egyptian” (81) he explains, nearly became a proper phonetic alphabet, having reached “a syllabus composed of phonetic characters,” but at that point the culture was content to continue “resting upon the labors.” According to Morgan, it was “the inquisitive Phoenician” who took the Egyptian hieroglyph to the next level of human advancement.
In relying on *a priori* frameworks to reconstitute African territories as imperial property, Haggard had only to draw from contemporary discursive practices. In his autobiography, he attributes inspiration for *King Solomon’s Mines* to the stone ruins of Great Zimbabwe, which had been discovered by European explorers in South Africa decades before. As Patrick Brantlinger notes in his introduction to *She*, “no European commentators believed they could have been constructed by black Africans.” The explorer J. Theodore Bent, who provided the first detailed examination of the ruins for the West, rejects the idea:

> It is … very valuable and confirmatory evidence … that the builders were of a Semitic race and of Arabian origin, and quite excludes the possibility of any negroid race having had more to do with their construction than as the slaves of a race of higher cultivation; for it is a well-accepted fact that the negroid brain never could be capable of taking the initiative in work of such intricate nature. (Bent xiv)

Bent’s reasoning shows the influence of materialist concepts of evolutionary anthropology, in which “both past and present social formations” were understood in terms of their tool-making and metal-working capacities (i.e., the savage “Stone Age,” the barbaric “Bronze Age” and the pre-civilized to civilized “Iron Age”). Because the ruins of Zimbabwe included iron smelting enclosures and other sophisticated technologies, Bent assumes that its inhabitants could not have been black Africans. From what he interprets as evidence of zodiological worship and temples to ancient Middle Eastern deities, Bent concludes that the “authors of these ruins were a northern race coming from Arabia” (xviii)—a hypothesis that was re-used by imperialists in a number of African cultural contexts.

But the most popular explanation of their origins, and the one that inspired Haggard, was that the ruins were remnants of the Biblical King Solomon’s “Golden Ophir,” a region

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103 Peter Melville Logan notes that for the majority of Victorian anthropologists, the “defining trait of a primitive mind was the inability to think abstractly” (“On Culture”).
mentioned numerous times in the Old Testament as the source of the ruler’s immense wealth. This legend was so pervasive in the white settler community that, according to Bent, “the names of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba were on everybody’s lips, and have become so distasteful to us that we never expect to hear them again without an involuntary shudder” (64). The settlers’ ardent acceptance of the myth speaks to its power of justifying their presence in Africa as a project of reclamation, while erasing local black Africans as relevant players in human teleology.

In *King Solomon’s Mines*, Haggard uses his protagonist’s encounters with ancient statues to legitimize the epistemological supremacy of the British Empire. Upon entering into the lost civilization of Kukuana, the explorer Allan Quatermain is initially transfixed by the “Silent Ones”: three colossal statues that, like immortal guardians, stand “in solitude and gaz[e] out across the plain forever” (161). But following his slippage into pre-modern forms of religious awe, Quatermain is seized with “an intense curiosity” to classify and contain them: “to know whose were the hands that had shaped them, who was it that had dug the pit and made the road.” After Quatermain and his companions consult their knowledge of “Classical” civilizations, they identify the figures as representations of Middle Eastern gods and goddesses contemporaneous with Solomon’s reign. In the eyes of the Victorian explorers, the statues shift from living idols into confirmatory objects of Victorian epistemological dominance. “Perhaps these colossi were designed by some Phoenician official who managed the mines. Who can say?” Quatermain concludes. The idols’ status as “bad” objects capable of awakening doubts about the comprehensiveness of Victorian categories of knowledge is evoked only to be dispelled.

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104 In his 1926 autobiography Haggard names the Golden Ophir myth as being the likely source of inspiration for *King Solomon’s Mines*, and states his continued belief that Solomon’s wealth was obtained from Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) (242). However, he does not believe that either the Biblical King or the Phoenicians were the architects of Great Zimbabwe, asserting instead that the ruins were built by “a lost civilization”: “who they were, what they were, we do not and perhaps never shall know” (243). Conjecture that they had been constructed by the ancestors of local African tribes was gaining increasing traction within scientific archaeological circles at the time. See Maynard W. Swanson’s “Colonizing the Past: Origin Myths of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins” in *Africa and Africans in Antiquity*, edited by Edwin M. Yamauchi (Michigan State UP, 2001), pp. 291-320.
She’s Statue of Truth undergoes a similar transformation under Holly’s imperial gaze, though his assumption of epistemological mastery is portrayed with a more satirical edge. Though initially he personifies the statue, asking Ayesha, breathlessly, “Who is she?” and notes that he could almost “fancy some living spirit shone through the marble prison” (234), his sense of wonder dissipates into clinical detachment once Ayesha decodes its inscription. As Holly prepares to leave the figure, he adds as an afterthought, “[i]t is at any rate suggestive of the scientific knowledge that these long-dead worshippers of Truth had recognized the fact that the globe is round” (234). The statue is no longer “she,” an embodied, pseudo-animate wonder spawned out of a vanished people, but “it,” a specimen confirming the veracity of Holly’s scientific objectivism.

Throughout She, in his eagerness to maintain a pose of self-assurance and certainty, Holly’s efforts to explain the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar become increasingly laboured. As Karlin notes in his introduction, Holly attempts to provide an “earnest anthropological account” of the Amahagger (xv), “Europe’s racial and sexual nightmare,” borders on the farcical. Holly describes the local cattle as resembling “the Norfolk red-pole strain” (Haggard 86), as if he is taking a field survey, immediately before the novel veers into the gothic as the tribe attempts ritualistically to devour Holly and his friends. Even Holly’s appearance, which is apparently of such hulking ugliness that it converted one witness to Darwin’s “monkey theory” (17), works to simultaneously shore up and interrogate Victorian models of historical progress. Karlin asserts that the “system of representations in the book is incoherent and unstable; it is a work which contradicts itself at every level of genre, theme, and style” (xv). The coherence of the novel’s version of world history becomes especially unstable when attempting to classify and contain the material culture of Africa.
The Negro Head

While the Statue of Truth arises out of Eurocentric convictions about civilization being an inherently “white” achievement, Holly’s encounter with what he describes as a “monument fashioned, like the well-known Egyptian Sphinx, by a forgotten people” (60) on the East coast of Africa provides an overt challenge to that assumption. Situated on a cliff’s precipice, the statue, which is the first thing that Holly spies upon his arrival on the continent, looks strikingly like “a colossal negro’s head.” Holly’s initial attempt at epistemological containment fails; he hypothesizes that the statue is “an emblem of warning or defiance against enemies”: a scenario that uncomfortably positions Holly and his companions as its intended targets. Eventually, Holly explains to the reader that they could not take the time properly to ascertain who made the monument, and for what purpose, because they “had other things to attend to.” Instead, the protagonists leave the colossus to “sullenly stare[e] from age to age out across the changing sea.” Like Kingslake’s Sphinx, the gaze of the Negro Head is directed towards eternity, severing it from worldly concerns and attachments.

Haggard’s choice of a black African statue, rather than a more familiarly “European” figure like the Statue of Truth, as the first cultural object that his protagonists encounter must be understood in context of the commodification of black bodies in the imperial imagination. As Elaine Freedgood notes in *The Ideas in Things*, “Negro Head” was a highly flexible trope in the nineteenth century, used by English speakers to denote “a nest of tree ants in the Caribbean” [1781], “a strong plug tobacco of a black colour” [1839], and “Australian beech tree that ‘provides a hard richly coloured furniture wood’” [1889] (83). As noted previously, there were also frequent comparisons of the skin colour of African slaves to mahogany—a wood whose popularity in Victorian parlours, Freedgood argues, enacted a “symbolic reification” (50) of British control over black bodies.
As seen with Haggard’s depiction of the Negro Head, however, the same cognitive processes that allowed Victorian explorers to equate displaced slaves with domestic products manufactured from the spoils of empire also made objects of African manufacture difficult cognitively to separate from indigenous populations. The ontologically flattening effects of imperial discourse, which habitually reduces everything on the frontier to raw material to be exploited, also charges the colossal head’s “fiendish and terrifying expression” (60) with the collective resentments of the oppressed peoples it resembles. It is not surprising, therefore, that Holly’s first impulse upon encountering the unexpected monument on the African coast is to deny that it exists at all. He insists that it is impossible for him to ascertain whether the Negro Head was fashioned by human hands, or whether it is a “mere of freak of nature.” His equivocation over the Negro Head’s reality as a made thing has a real-life precedent in Victorian travelogues. Harriet Martineau’s encounter with the Egyptian Sphinx at Giza, for example, went almost unrecorded in *Eastern Life: Past and Present* (1848) because she initially mistook it for a “capriciously formed rock” (64). Upon re-examination, she exclaims: “[w]hat a monstrous idea was it from which this monster sprang! … I feel that a stranger either does not see the Sphinx at all, or he sees it as a nightmare” (81). Her response to the colossus shifts from unconscious denial to repulsion to, finally, racial classification; at the end of her account, she describes its countenance as being similar to “what one sees in Nubia at every village” (83). In his classic essay, “Death on the Nile,” John Barrell argues that Martineau’s initial uncertainty about what meaning to draw from the Sphinx results from the cognitive dissonance created by her admiration for the ancient civilization, whose art and culture had captured the European imagination, and the repulsion she expresses for the contemporary inhabitants of Egypt and Africa.\(^\text{105}\) Martineau’s unconscious erasure of the Sphinx, he argues, functions as an imaginative

\(^{105}\) Barrell explains that Martineau’s linkage of the Sphinx’s physiognomy to the area’s natives “shows her allegiance” to ideas about the Ethiopian origins of Egyptian civilization which by this time were widely “thought to
negation of its racial features, which connect its existence to the current inhabitants of Egypt, and Africa more widely. He also argues that her initial horror at its “monstrous” visage reveals the “genocidal fantasy” (119) that inspired Victorian ideas about the sub-humanity of non-European peoples in general, and black Africans in particular. The rhetoric of thinghood adopted by imperial Victorians on the frontier, therefore, not only disconnects cultural objects from the complex social histories encoded within them, but also uncouples them from the often violent history of their imperial acquisition.

Those same genocidal fantasies, and the pseudo-scientific apparatuses that gave them respectability, inform the depiction of She’s savage African tribe, the Amahagger. Though they are not explicitly black Africans, their presentation in the text as “a demonic cannibalistic matriarchy squatting on the ruins of a lost civilization” (Karlin xv) evokes European stereotyping of Africans as irredeemably savage. In her summation of her engineered race, Ayesha mimics contemporary notions of the expected extinction of inferior races by claiming that the Amahagger would have long since “destroyed each other” (160) were it not for her intervention.

Unlike Martineau, however, who ultimately converts the Great Sphinx into a comprehensible object within soon-to-be discounted (in the nineteenth century) theories about ancient Egypt’s native African origins, Holly resists connecting the colossus’s facial features to the people currently inhabiting the region. In a text that ostentatiously piles on superfluous archaeological details about the Kôr’s material culture to verify the “reality” of the textual world, Holly describes the colossus as an inherently unfathomable entity that will “still stand when as

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106 According to Patrick Brantlinger, Haggard initially named She’s atavistic tribe the “Askate,” which sounds vaguely like Astarte, a goddess worshipped by ancient Phoenicians. However, “he wanted to locate his people ethnologically among the ‘savages’” (Introduction xx), so he chose a name borrowed from Zulu grammar (ama is a plural prefix).
many centuries as are numbered between [Amenarta, the Ancient Egyptian princess’s] day and our own are added to the year that bore us to oblivion” (61). Holly’s removal of the statue from historical time allows him to avoid further investigations into its origins. But its presence still generates epistemological uncertainty in the protagonists. According to Victorian ethnographic classifications that inform the narrative of She, the only native inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa capable of conceiving, let alone constructing, such a colossal statue would have been the Kôr. However, the Negro Head is located far away from the ruins of their civilization, cut off by a vast “death-breeding” (67) swamp, which only the Amahagger themselves are able to pass through safely. Holly also makes it clear that the colossus bears no physical resemblance whatsoever to Kôr’s original inhabitants. Holly’s one attempt at narrative containment fails; his suggestion that the Negro Head was built to ward off anyone who approached the harbour contradicts his later assertion that it and the wharf nearby may have been constructed by a foreign white civilization for the purposes of trade. In a comedic moment, Holly exposes the instability of white-origin narratives with respect to African material culture, noting that possible builders could include “the Babylonians and the Phoenicians, and the Persians and all manner of people, all more or less civilized, to say nothing of the Jews whom everybody ‘wants’ nowadays” (64).

Who built the Negro Head? The text leaves suggestive threads dangling. In addition to sharing the Amahagger’s “sullen” appearance, the mountain-born materiality of the colossus is linked to the tribe’s name, which, according to their Elder, means “People of the Rocks” (77). The Negro Head thus monumentalizes the text’s underclass and affords them a place in human culture that Victorian narratives of progress deny them. More strikingly, it also exposes elisions in Holly and Ayesha’s exhaustive dialogues on the unfolding of two thousand years of world history—which Ayesha herself lived through—as neither character shows any knowledge of the
region’s history beyond Kôr’s ruins. The existence of the Negro Head as a textual element of *She* counteracts the text’s claims of the constitutional savagery of the Amahagger, and by extension of black Africans in general, disrupting *She*’s imperial discourses as well as its narrative cohesion.

The Negro Head’s destabilizing effect on Holly’s white-washed account of world history mirrors the “confusing and contradictory” (Coombes 22) imperial explanations about the origins of the bronze statues of Benin City (located in present-day Nigeria) in the 1890s. According to Victorian hierarchical ideas of race, the sophisticated metal casting required to manufacture them was beyond the cognitive abilities of the Edo people. These discoveries, Coombes argues in *Reinventing Africa*, “should have fundamentally shaken the bedrock of the derogatory Victorian assumptions about Africa” (7). Instead, the museum and ethnographic establishment doubled down on its imperial hegemonies. They coveted the objects themselves while demoting their makers to the lowest levels of savagery—the resulting cognitive dissonance requiring ever more “convoluted and self-defeating arguments” (24). Efforts to establish the object-history of the bronzes required strategic elisions, such as, Coombes argues, “ignoring earlier travel narratives which marvelled at Benin culture” (25). Similar to Bent’s hypothesis about the original builders of Great Zimbabwe, Victorian interpreters of the bronzes constructed highly unlikely historical scenarios, such as the one depicted in the conclusion of an 1898 issue of the weekly journal *Nature*. The article states that “the art was brought to the West Coast Hinterland by some European trader, prisoner, or resident” (“Cast Metal Work” 226). It additionally suggests, apparently without thought to undermining its former assertion, that the bronzes could be of African origin, but constructed by the “Benin upper classes,” who are, the article insists, “not negroid.” These are the discursive snares that Holly attempts to evade with his rhetoric of
thinghood, treating the statue as an unaccountable marvel whose ontology exists outside of realms of human knowledge.

**The White Sphinx**

These same imperial tensions come to bear in H. G. Wells’s depiction of the White Sphinx, the colossal marble statue in *The Time Machine*. While the statue exists in England’s distant future rather than Africa’s present, its transfixing gaze signals a much more overt criticism of imperialism than Haggard’s African statues. As with Holly’s Negro Head, the colossus is the first object of interest that the Time Traveller encounters in the future world, and he stares at it for “half-a-minute, perhaps, or half-an-hour” (Wells 19). The Traveller also anthropomorphizes the Sphinx, noting that its “sightless eyes seemed to watch me” with a “faint shadow of a smile upon its lips.” Instead of interpreting in the smile a tacit support of his endeavours, however, the Traveller is struck by the “full temerity” (20) of his voyage. The character’s fearful hesitation at the brink of exploration reflects a rising pessimism about the imperial project more broadly, at a time when colonial expansion had begun to reach its limit and “resistance to domination” had become “increasingly articulate” (McClure 8).

Wells’s White Sphinx is a product of the fin de siècle, a cultural moment in which sphinxes were a literary and artistic motif of choice. The Egyptian Sphinx re-emerged as the “chief symbol of the East in the imperial imagination” (Cantor and Hufngael 234) when ideas of ancient Egypt as belonging to the realm of the mysterious and barbaric Other began to trickle back into the imperial consciousness (Gange *Dialogues* 41). The Greek version of the sphinx-myth is also evoked, as Frank Scafella notes in one of the first extended scholarly treatments of the White Sphinx. He claims the text “must be read as a variation of Oedipus’s encounter with the Sphinx on the road to Thebes” (255). All these cultural influences converge on the White Sphinx, marking it as the harbinger of dangerous, destructive knowledge.
Scafella notes that Wells provided no explicit explanation for his decision to make the Traveller’s relationship with a statue so central to his narrative, but if the striking similarities to Haggard’s Negro Head are any indication, Wells was at least partially inspired by its discombobulating effect on the protagonist of She. Initially, the appearance of the two statues seem deliberately to be in counterpoint to one another, particularly with respect to the black Negro Head’s hostile scowl against the White Sphinx’s tranquil grin. However, they share the same colossal size and advanced age, which both protagonists discern despite the moss and other verdigris growing over them. Beyond their superficial similarities, the protagonists’ encounters with the statues have much in common. Both sightings occur after each protagonist has recovered from a traumatic experience, leaving him disoriented at the threshold of his entry into an unknown land. Holly spies the Negro Head the morning after he and his companions barely survive being capsized during a violent storm. The Traveller, meanwhile, encounters the White Sphinx after he has been similarly “capsized” by the time machine when it flings him “headlong through the air” (19). The vulnerable state of both protagonists emphasizes the power reversals at play; instead of looking upon the statues with the proprietary gaze of an imperialist, the protagonists are themselves transfixed.

Finally, much as Harriet Martineau initially mistakes the Great Sphinx for an oddly-formed rock, each protagonist has difficulty verifying the statues’ physical existence. In a gesture that satirizes Victorian positivist ideas of knowledge, the Traveller attempts to grasp the “objecthood” of the White Sphinx through the gradual accumulation of empirical observations. But his observations are conspicuously hesitant: the colossus might be made of “white marble” and it is “like a Sphinx” (19). Unlike the sphinxes he’s familiar with, however, which have wings “carried vertically at the sides,” this figure’s wings “were spread so that it seemed to hover.” He also indicates that the statue has a face, but does not reveal whether or not it is a human face—a
notable omission, given the Traveller’s attempts to ascertain when, how, and why humanity as he knows it has seemingly vanished from the future world. Finally, the Time Traveller’s attribution of human—and malicious—qualities to the statue seems to come in lieu of an interest in its history and purpose, recalling Holly’s own deferment of further investigation into the Negro Head’s origins. Instead, the Traveller anthropomorphizes the White Sphinx, treating it as an antagonist that seems to “smile in mockery” (29) at his misfortunes.

*The Time Machine*’s connection to imperial romances has been well-established, particularly in Paul Cantor and Peter Hufnagel’s influential essay, “The Empire of the Future,” in which the authors argue that the Wellsian depiction of England in A.D. 802,701 is responding to the representations of strange lands in popular imperial romances. Their argument is derived principally from the Traveller’s discovery of a “good” tribe and an “evil” tribe: the docile, childlike Eloi versus the hideous, earth-dwelling Morlocks. But Wells evokes these motifs only to undermine them, indicting the limitations of the Traveller’s Eurocentrism. Like Holly’s often belaboured attempts to verify the stability of Victorian epistemologies, the Traveller’s hypotheses about the social structure of the future world are based on Victorian ideas of historical and cultural development. Like the British Museum with respect to its collection of Ancient Egyptian antiquities, the Traveller must continually modify his narrative of (the future) world history in light of new material discoveries. Cantor and Hufnagel summarize Wells’s indictment of his protagonist’s imperial assumptions:

[The Time Traveller] has entered a world totally unfamiliar to him, and yet he believes he can figure out by his own efforts exactly how it works. His typical procedure is to observe something in the world of the future and immediately try to erect a grand speculative theory to explain how it came about. In this, he resembles Victorian explorers in fact and fiction, who were equally eager to theorize about the native cultures they encountered, often on the basis of very limited knowledge. (45)

Using Victorian assumptions about the progressive character of human history—and England’s prominence at the forefront of that history—the Traveller readily assumes the human-like Eloi
and Morlocks are his degenerated descendants, their devolution resulting from the “languor and decay” (28) that set in after the natural world had been thoroughly conquered. Though his explanations require frequent adjustment, he still manages to fit every object he encounters into a coherent narrative of the unfolding of humanity’s future. The notable exception is the White Sphinx; beyond hazarding a guess about the materials used in its manufacture, the Traveller conspicuously avoids speculating upon the statue’s origins and purpose. As a symbol of the future world’s unsolved mystery, the statue “seems to brood over the story, always present in the background” (Hammond 94), existing as a silent check on the Traveller’s working theories on how the future world is organized.

Similar to his former, incorrect assumptions about the future world, the Traveller’s ultimate conclusion about the social relationship between the Eloi and the Morlocks is impossible to extricate from “categories imposed from his homeland” (Cantor and Hufnagel 240). It is surprising that critical consensus has historically accepted the Traveller’s final hypothesis at face value, even though the character lacks legible artifacts or immortal white queens to confirm its veracity. Although the Traveller does not (or chooses not to) consider alternatives to his conclusion that the once-oppressed Morlocks are now feeding on their former masters, he admits that it “may be as wrong an explanation as mortal wit could invent” (Wells 62). As Kathryn Hume notes, the critical discourse surrounding The Time Machine has tended to ignore the “failure of any social message to emerge from the world of the Eloi and Morlocks” (202). When the Traveller’s superimposition of his own worldview is taken away, his speculative theory about the history of the future world proves to be woefully inadequate.

Though the Traveller successfully escapes the future world, his failure to solve its “riddle” is implied by the White Sphinx symbolically devouring him, as he must enter the statue’s hollow pedestal to recover his time machine. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the
Traveller’s failure to interpret the future world is not a result of insufficient clues, but rather from his increasing lack of interest in uncovering and interpreting them. In the midst of the Palace of Green Porcelain, the possible ruins of a museum that might contain clues to the future world’s development, the broken-down mechanisms on display have only “the interest of puzzles” for the Traveller—and then only because they might provide “powers that might be of use against the Morlocks” (51). The tendency of imperial discourses to connect disavowed knowledge to genocidal fantasies is brought into sharp relief when the protagonist destroys one of the machines on display to arm himself with a makeshift mace, declaring that he “longed very much to kill a Morlock or so” (54).

The Traveller’s instinctive sense of the connection between the Morlocks and the Sphinx, which Scafella argues “leave[s] little doubt in the reader’s mind that the White Sphinx is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual condition to which man as Morlock has fallen” (259), is a clue to the future world that the Traveller never consciously entertains: the possibility that the ancestors of the Morlocks, and not the Eloi, were its architects. The text provides some evidence for this interpretation. The well-shafts that tunnel deep into the ground suggest an enforced separation imposed between the two species, since the pedestal on which the figure sits contains “a small apartment” (62) at ground level through which the Morlocks can easily enter the surface. Furthermore, the doors to the apartment can only be “opened from within,” suggesting that the Morlocks themselves control egress between the two worlds (they enjoy similar ease of access to the Palace of Green Porcelain). Finally, the colossal and impressive figure of the White Sphinx, with its “highly decorated and deep framed panels” (31), is an unusual choice to demarcate the most direct passage between the Morlocks and Eloi if the latter had, according to the Traveller, “thrust his brother man out of the ease and the sunshine” (47). As well, their white skin, domination of the childlike Eloi, and “instinctive” affinity for
machinery marks them as potentially the descendants of the English people as a whole, rather than as members of any particular Victorian class. Interpreting the evidence presented in this fashion, the White Sphinx in *The Time Machine* functions less as a metonym of the Other and more as a symbol of the British Empire itself—its protean form reflecting the epistemological contortions required to sustain the nation’s idealized self-image.

**Conclusion**

George Stocking Jr. describes the discipline of anthropology in the Victorian era as oriented towards distance, particularly with respect to its dark-skinned human subjects: “one could study their artifacts, which were often preserved in museums of ‘natural history’ along with other objects from vegetal, mineral, and animal realms” (273). As such, the complexities of human existence were reduced to its material fragments, which were of interest only in their ability to be subordinated to “the general evolutional process.” Stocking notes that Victorian anthropology’s rigidly hierarchical concept of racial difference without a doubt contributed to the “dehumanization and objectification of anthropology’s human subject matter.” But as the British Empire expanded during the late nineteenth century, the fantasy of a total and complete account of things was increasingly stymied by the sheer volume and complexity of the nation’s colonial acquisitions. Thomas Richards summarizes:

> People began the nineteenth century believing that all the knowledge in the world fell in a great standing order, a category of categories, but, after dozens of Causabons failed to make sense of the thousands of facts squeezed into library catalogues, biological taxonomies, and philological treatises, they ended it by believing that the order of things was easier said than done. (4)

In the case of the late-century scramble for Africa, the cultural materials collected were, by their very existence, disruptive to Eurocentric models of human history. Taking account of Africa’s extensive and diverse material culture required ever more unwieldy explanations—delivered with increasingly jingoistic insistence—to comfortably situate them within home-grown structures of knowledge. The artifacts’ imperial “thinging” worked rhetorically to fog over the
existence of their human manufacturers, providing a means for their cultural histories to be simultaneously evoked and disavowed. But statues like the Negro Head also thwart this rhetorical *legerdemain*. They receive too much narrative attention to function as mere notations of the Real, and their physical similarity to contemporary populations undermines the protagonists’ attempts to interpret the artifacts as signifying a generic “unknowable” and “beyond.” Instead, they expose the ideological underpinnings of imperial systems of classification, which attempt to reconstitute objects that do not immediately fit neatly into pre-existing, allegedly universal categories. The repressed returns: attempts to reduce the innate multiplicity of a colonized object’s valuations—even by rhetorically rejecting its categorization entirely—can result in those objects transforming into Brownian things.
Conclusion

“Persons and Things do turn up so vexatiously in this life, and will in a manner insist on being noticed.”
—Gabriel Betteredge, The Moonstone

Creating Thinghood

The aim of this dissertation has been to interrogate the way in which “things” threatened Victorian conceptions of selfhood, and how novels manifested those fears. The project ultimately revealed that Victorian thing culture was created by nineteenth-century notions of acquisitive identity formation. As I have sought to demonstrate throughout this project, much of the Victorian zeal for universalizing truth-claims and rigid classificatory methodologies was an attempt ontologically to “tame” objects, reducing their meaning to a single coherent discourse that was closely tied to the identity of the possessor. This notion of manifesting one’s singularity of self through one’s possessions shored up a sense of personal and social distinctiveness against the alienations of modern life. The imaginative concept also took advantage of the profusion of material goods made newly accessible by industrialization and colonialism.

The nineteenth century’s belief in the homology between people and their possessions, however, had a number of metaphysical consequences, which the era’s novels interrogate. To quote Lynn Festa, if objects can acquire character and personality from people, “how are we to prevent them from overtaking persons?” (123). A fear of object-insurrection is, as Dorothy Van Ghent argued decades ago, embedded in the many disconcerting “metabolic conversion[s]” (221) between people and things in Dickens’s oeuvre. Mainly, this project has focused on nineteenth-century novelists’ investigations into other kinds of metaphysical difficulties attending the era’s imaginative bonding of possession to owner. For instance, if objects can be infused with an individual’s personality, can one’s embodied self become similarly “permeated” by one’s possessions? Des Esseintes’ increasingly spiritual frame of mind, affected strongly by his
collection of religious art and literature, accentuates the power of non-human influences on one’s psyche. Meanwhile, the perils that Jane Eyre and the unnamed narrator from “The Yellow Wall-Paper” experience in domestic interiors expose the exclusionary nature of the Victorian owner-possession relationship. The texts consider: what happens to the subjectivity of people who cannot “possess” and who are surrounded by objects meant to incarnate someone else’s personality? Finally, many imperial romances, like the works of H. Rider Haggard, often portray objects whose social histories cannot be readily assimilated within imperial structures of knowledge that were presumed to be universally applicable. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, the colonial objects contain multitudes, which, the novels suggest, inherently undermine imperial forms of object-mastery. All these scenarios threaten the Western liberal subject with the possibility of being contaminated, influenced, or wholly transformed by contact with these entities, thus potentially upending the hierarchy between subjects and objects.

Ultimately, the notion of a self that could be manifested through the acquisition, ordering, and categorization of objects proved too unwieldy to maintain confidently beyond the Victorian era. This concept of identity formation, as many unfortunate characters in the novels analyzed demonstrate, was both deliberately exclusionary and intensely fragile. Meanwhile, the Victorian obsession with exhaustively enumerating a given object’s uses, properties and histories eventually forced them to consider “whether knowledge could ever in fact be unified” (Richards 5). As Richards notes, the nineteenth century’s Casaubon-like efforts to universally catalogue the material world revealed that it could not, in fact, be easily reduced to a list of qualities. To quote Heidegger in Being in Time, they began to realize that “subjecting the manifold to tabulation does not guarantee a real understanding of what has been ordered” (51).

No wonder, then, that by the early twentieth century, the conceptual gulf between the kingdoms of subject and object seems to widen considerably. Modernist experiments in narrative
form often made it their goal to convey the transitive impermanence of selfhood, increasingly conceived of as existing in a realm almost entirely removed from the material world. In “Modern Fiction,” Virginia Woolf declares the materialist conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel to be obsolete: “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments we provide” (189; my emphasis). Modernist novelists like Woolf and James Joyce instead focused on personal and textual inwardness, attempting to portray a mental life that was situated within—but not bound to—its milieu of space and time. Meanwhile, Georg Simmel describes the configuration of the world of objects in in 1900 as “an interconnected enclosed world that has increasingly fewer points at which the subjective soul can interpose its will and feelings” (460).

While I am intrigued by Mao’s assertion that “modernism was … centrally animated by … an admiration for an object world beyond the manipulations of consciousness” (11), I disagree with his related assumption that a consideration of an “object qua object” was “only sporadically anticipated” (13) before modernism. Victorians did grapple with the “radical alterity” of things, but instead of seriously examining that alterity, they attempted to supervise it. As outlined throughout, the Victorians created a number of discourses to manage things. Nineteenth-century notions of fetishism, as Peter Logan argues, projected a fear and awe of things onto the “primitive” Other. In my final chapter, I argued that Victorians attempted to use the unsettling alterity of things to their own ends, creating a “rhetoric of thinghood” that allowed imperialists to treat problematic cultural objects of the Other as existing beyond the realm of Western knowledge. And, as I plan to investigate in further projects, they also attempted to possess and instrumentalize things for imperialist purposes—which frequently had unforeseen consequences. The next section provides an example of the trajectory of this future line of inquiry into Victorian thing culture.
Managing Thinghood

The discourse surrounding the Kohinoor’s Diamond’s display at the Great Exhibition in 1851 demonstrates that Victorians both recognized the power of things and attempted to harness it. According to Bill Brown’s thing theory, however, the very essence of a thing is that its disruptive energies cannot be managed by systems of containment, which is evident in the almost universal disappointment that visitors expressed about an object that was supposed to be the star attraction of the event.

The Kohinoor Diamond had been annexed by the British Empire from the Sikh Empire according to the terms of the Treaty of Lahore in 1849. Though some Victorians, including the Queen herself, expressed some misgivings about the nature of its acquisition (it had essentially been forced from the hands of the eleven-year-old Maharajah, Duleep Singh), its migration from the subcontinent to the metropolis was a foregone conclusion once it was in British possession. By this time, objects from the colonies in general and from India in particular had become commonplace in England. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue in *Empire*, the movement of Indian goods into English middle-class homes demonstrate capitalism’s “internalization of the outside”: “capital,” they argue, “touches what is foreign and makes it proper” (226). To put it another way, the mid-century popularity of Indian objects demonstrates the way in which capitalist empires domesticate alien objects by reconstituting their value and meaning. As Suzanne Daly argues in *The Empire Inside*, the Victorian novel had a central role in connecting Kashmir shawls, cotton textiles (particularly muslin and calico), tea, and gemstones to women’s lives in the home. These once exotic items were thus transformed into essential components of a solidly “English” identity.

In contrast, much of the imperial propaganda surrounding the diamond emphasized its *un*-domesticity, playing up its singularity as well as its exotic Eastern pedigree. Previous to its
unveiling to the public at the Great Exhibition, newspapers speculated about its staggering monetary worth, which was “placed somewhere between £1 and £3 million” (Young 127). The exhibit was given prominence of place inside the Crystal Palace, located just adjacent to the crystal fountain at the entrance to the massive Indian pavilion. The diamond itself was housed inside a six-foot-high gilded iron cage that featured a crown at its top. The casement obscured the presence of a machine “which cause[d] [the diamond], on the slightest touch, to enter an iron box” (*Tallis’s* 1:150). Though the elaborate security measures were ostensibly intended to prevent the theft of the diamond, the aesthetics conveyed the idea of a prized creature being held captive. Though it made pains to emphasize its Otherness, the discourse surrounding the diamond simultaneously stressed the empire’s control over that Otherness. The jewel was intended to function as a synecdoche of the colonial territory itself, which the *Illustrated Exhibitor* guidebook to the Exhibition describes as “India the far-off, the strange, the wonderful, the original, the true, the brave, the conquered” (376). The periodical’s effusive rhetoric with regard to India and the Kohinoor was not unusual; as Young notes, “even factual, staid records of the Exhibition … were disposed to leave aside the discipline and economy of their classificatory agendas” when describing it, instead narrating “fabulous if sketchy accounts of dynastic intrigue, power struggles, and Oriental mysteries” (128). The publicity was effective. On the first day of the Exhibition, “[m]any in the waiting crowd made straight for the Koh-i-Noor. … Policemen, charged with keeping the crowds at bay, were almost lifted off their feet by the surge” (Dalyrmple and Anand 155).

When encountered “face-to-face,” though, the gemstone failed to impress. Under the stark natural light streaming in through the Crystal Palace’s glass panels, the Kohinoor diamond, in Isobel Armstrong’s words, “lost its aura” (229). *Tallis’s History and Description of the Crystal Palace* summarizes the general assessment of the populace: “To ordinary eyes it is
nothing more than an egg-shaped lump of glass” (1:150). Armstrong suggests that the diamond’s physical likeness to the glass of the exhibition, as well as to the glass of the container that housed it, caused the Kohinoor’s “worth” to “chang[e] catastrophically” (230). The populace’s dismissal of the diamond as mere glass resonates with Brown’s description about the differences attending the way we perceive objects as opposed to “things.” Namely, we look through objects; we look at things. Surrounded on all sides by the very same material they were apparently seeing on display, the diamond seemed ordinary, and at worst, mundane.

As Jane Arnold argues, the visitors’ disappointment was caused by the collision of two radically differing systems of value:

India valued the size and weight of the stone as a natural find, granting value to the diamond as a product of nature that could symbolize and suggest a natural order to religious and political power; in exact contrast, Europe valued the stone’s geometrically cut shape and resulting translucence, granting value to the diamond as a manufactured, marketable commodity. (41)

The diamond’s poor reception also reveals how ill-equipped the British populace was in the nineteenth century to conceive of objects outside a single interpretive lens. Having been raised in a culture that insisted that its systems of value were both universally applicable and unassailable in their correctness, they could only consider the Kohinoor based on their understanding of what a “good” diamond looked like, and it had failed that assessment.\(^\text{107}\)

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\(^{107}\) Prince Albert, humiliated by the diamond’s poor reception, attempted to alter its presentation: he had installed “a lattice of gas lamps and angled mirrors around the cage” to off-set the Palace’s bleaching sunlight, but “praise … remained lukewarm” (Dalrymple and Anand 156). Finally, on 14 June 1851, a “dramatic new display was revealed”: a wooden cabin surrounded the diamond, effectively blocking out all natural light, and the original bolt of red cloth was substituted with a “vibrantly coloured velvet.” The structure did make the diamond appear more impressive to onlookers, but it was difficult to access, and the sealed-in cabin became unbearably hot. “The press began to blame the Koh-i-Noor for being difficult, as if it were some kind of contrary and disappointing child” (158).
Which is not to say that the diamond did not, in fact, have thing-like qualities, but they were not what its handlers had intended. The Kohinoor’s presentation fomented an uneasy awareness in the imperial populace about the contingency of their own systems of valuation—or as Armstrong puts it, the exhibit became a “farcical comedy” (230) of value, with the underwhelming appearance of the diamond standing in stark contrast to its Baroque accoutrements. The otherwise dry, detached Tallis’s Crystal Palace ridicules its prominence by alluding to idolatry, describing the “worshippers” and their “adoration of the relics” while remarking on the “little jets of gas” that attempted, in vain, to “throw their light on the god of the temple” (1:150). Another guidebook, which took seriously the Exhibition rhetoric that the event was intended to display the useful products of industry, complained that “the block of coal, the pig of iron, or the bar of steel” would not “attract a ten thousandth a part of the attention that will be mitted on the diamond” (Guide-Book 3). Punch, ever ready to mock the pretentions of the event, illustrated a country squire and his family staring in wonder at a large, unrefined lump of crystal, having mistaken it for the famous Indian diamond (whose crown-topped display cabinet can be glimpsed in the background) (see Fig. 8).

When changes in context did not affect the diamond’s value in the eyes of the British populace, Prince Albert instead altered its materiality. After the Exhibition, the Prince Consort ordered that the diamond be re-polished, transforming its Oriental-style rose-cut into a European shallow brilliant. Albert contributed his own Sovereign “ordering hand” to its transformation,
spending “hours and hours … assisting in the cutting of the Kohinoor” (Hahn 201). But as Ian Balfour notes, “There is no doubt that such a substantial reduction in the gem’s weight came as a disappointment to many, not least to the Prince Consort who voiced his views on the matter in no uncertain terms” (170).

The lighter but more dazzling stone was mounted in a brooch for the Queen’s personal use (see Fig. 9). But Victoria felt uncomfortable in the diamond’s presence. She wrote to her daughter in 1873 that “[n]o one feels more strongly than I do about India or how much I opposed our taking those countries and I think no more will be taken, for it is very wrong and no advantage to us. You know also how I dislike wearing the Koh-i-noor” (Fulford 111). At this point the British Monarchy had officially taken possession of the nation from the East India Trading Company. Rather than symbolizing the consolidation of her rule over the sub-continent, however, the diamond had, in Victoria’s mind, become the proverbial albatross around her neck, reminding her of the violence attending the British Imperial project that the exhibition’s marketing had noticeably left out of its accounts of the diamond’s blood-soaked history.

The manner in which the British monarchy subsequently adapted the Kohinoor epitomizes the cognitive processes that Victorian culture developed to integrate the irresolvable contradictions embodied in certain things into its national identity. As Bernard Cohn contends in “Representing Authority in Victorian India,” British rule in the subcontinent caused the
invention of many new forms of imperial “tradition” to contextualize colonial spoils. The monarchy’s response to the Kohinoor was no different. Upon the death of the Queen in 1901, the Kohinoor was amalgamated into the Crown Jewels—specifically into the crowns worn by queen consorts. It was first incorporated into the crown of Queen Alexandra, wife of Edward VII, for his coronation in 1902. After Edward’s death, it was transferred to the crown of Queen Mary, consort of George V, in 1911. Then it was moved to the crown of Queen Elizabeth, consort of George VI, in 1937. With every coronation of a male heir, the taming of the Kohinoor is symbolically re-enacted: an entity representing an alien alterity is absorbed into the constituency of the nation—a ceremony that mimics the strengthening of group cohesion through exogamy, embodied in the queen consort. In this fetishistic ritual, the British monarchy symbolically “triumphs” over the gem’s unsettling foreignness by ceremonially absorbing it into the body of the kingdom. By the logic of fetishism, the ceremony both acknowledges and disavows the fetish’s traumatic origins, most evident in the fact that its procession through queen-consorts ostensibly takes seriously the gem’s “Indian curse.”

Acknowledging Thinghood

With the dissolution of the British Empire, the Kohinoor’s thinghood has reasserted itself. Since India gained independence in 1947 and began making demands for the return of the diamond soon afterward, the Kohinoor’s ceremonial “marriage” to the reigning monarch has been noticeably arrested, having not been integrated into the crown of Queen Elizabeth II or into the vestments of her consort, Prince Philip. Instead the Kohinoor remains in the crown of the

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108 Cohn mostly focuses on constitutive programs to bolster British identity in the colony itself, noting, for instance, that following the Indian Rebellion of 1857, English visitors to India were expected to attend a “regular Mutiny pilgrimage to visit the sites of great events” (179), paying homage to the military and civilians “whose death made sacred, to the Victorian Englishmen, their rule in India.”
109 Though the superstition that the Kohinoor brings misfortune to its possessor had long existed in India, the idea that the curse did not extend to women (and gods) seems to have developed in the nineteenth century once it was the property of the British Crown. As late as 1850, Dalhousie, Governor-General of India, was defending himself against suggestions that the sudden death of Prince Albert and even the shocking attack on Victoria by Robert Francis Pate was proof that the Queen had been cursed by the gem. He would later write in 1858 that “if H. M. thinks it brings bad luck, let her give it back to me. I will take it and its ill-luck on speculation” (Dalhousie 78).
former consort: the newly titled (and now deceased) Queen Mother. In the meantime, repatriation of the diamond has become a national obsession in India, whose claims have frequently emphasized the consanguinity of gem and nation. In *The Glorious History of the Koh-i-noor*, the author N. B. Sen writes that “The biography of the Koh-i-Noor is the history of India and this unique diamond is as dear to India as Shakespeare is to England” (9). Dalyrmple and Anand note that as recently as 2015, an Indian group calling themselves “the Mountain of Light” announced their intention to sue the British Crown for the diamond, basing their claim on “the Common Law doctrine of ‘trespass to goods,’ arguing that the British government had stolen the diamond” (195). But given the diamond’s extensive history of ownership by rulers who were not, by modern standards, “Indian,” nations like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran may have equal claim to the diamond based on historical possession. Ironically, as Dalyrmple himself notes in the *Indian Express* daily news: “it is only because of the way the British wrote history that people have remembered the Kohinoor while everything else is forgotten. Other objects of loot like the Darya Noor (which is the sister diamond of the Kohinoor) and parts of the Peacock throne are in Iran and nobody speaks of it” (Roychowdhury). In other words, even in post-colonial contexts, the Victorian formula for subject sovereignty through object-mastery is still having a demonstrable effect on modern conceptions of identity, both personal and national. However, within the current political climate, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ascertain whose discursive ownership of an object should be given prominence.

In his introduction to *Things*, Bill Brown argues that things come to prominence when we pay attention to them: “the most familiar forms, once we look, seem unpredictable and inexplicable, to poets and physicists both” (6). As this project establishes, a great deal of our experience of thinghood results from distinctly modern concepts of mastery and ownership. More to the point, and as the Victorian novels examined reveal, humans tend to perceive the
strangeness of things when multiple—and in many cases contradictory—worldviews, epistemologies, or concepts layer upon a given object, disrupting the illusion of discursive unity. In other words, we “look” at once-invisible objects when cultural, political, economic or environmental upheavals compel us to notice them. In his consideration of Heideggerian phenomenology, Graham Harman writes: “If I look at a flower from thousands of different angles and perform hundreds of experiments on it, all of these actions will never add up to the total reality of the flower, which is always something deeper than whatever we might see, no matter how hard we work” (23). He also notes that human sensitivity to this inaccessible “deepness” can be triggered by “a change in one’s circumstances” (37). No wonder then, in what Latour refers to as the perpetual cycle of “revolutions, epistemological breaks, [and] epistemical ruptures” that define modernity, have things proliferated, seeming to “invade all its assemblies en masse” (50).

In fact, the contemporary prominence of identity politics, in which marginalized groups have organized around efforts to articulate shared experiences that have been suppressed by the dominant culture, has resulted in once “invisible” cultural objects becoming newly obtrusive. Consider, for instance, the actions of Corey Menafee, a black 38-year-old dishwasher who, in 2016, broke a windowpane in Calhoun College dining hall at Yale University, where he worked. The windowpane depicted a black man and woman carrying bales of cotton over their heads in a field “that look[ed] very much like a plantation” (Phippen)—an image that had either

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110 Even without the “invasion” of differing worldviews or discourses, things would still arise because, as Latour argues, the nature of modern concepts of forward-moving time ensures that the objects and their valuations must be constantly reassessed: “Entities have to be made contemporary by moving in step and have to be replaced by other things equally well aligned if time is to become a flow. Modern temporality is the result of a retraining imposed on entities that would pertain to all sorts of times and possess all sorts of ontological statuses without this harsh disciplining” (72).

111 The college is named after John. C. Calhoun, a staunch proponent of slaveholder rights during the American civil war and a lifelong supporter of segregation, in veneration of his political, military, and intellectual achievements. At the point of completing this dissertation, the university has resisted calls to have the college renamed. Harvard’s president Peter Salovey argued that to do so would “obscure” its “legacy of slavery rather than addressing it” (Gilmore).
gone unnoticed, been tacitly approved of, or been silently tolerated by the college’s predominantly white male residents for generations. In the parlance of thing theory, for most of Calhoun College’s history, the windowpane was something that was (figuratively) looked *through*, not *at*. But to quote Bill Brown, “a thing … can hardly function as a window” (“Thing Theory” 4), and according to Menafee himself: “It’s 2016, I shouldn’t have to come to work and see *things* like that” (my emphasis). The controversies surrounding Menafee’s actions led to a number of windowpanes depicting similar images being removed from the college and, in the words of the university to the *Washington Post*, “conserved for future study and possible contextual exhibition” (Bever). Both individuals and institutions continue to try to have it both ways, maintaining ownership over objects while attempting to neutralize their more insurrectionary resonances. Even as this dissertation is being completed, dozens of U.S. cities are contemplating the fate of their confederate monuments, which have become markedly conspicuous after the violent white supremacist rally on 11 August 2017, which was organized in protest of the planned removal of a statue of Robert E. Lee in Charlottesville, Virginia. “Things quicken,” Brown writes. “What you took to be the inanimate object-world slowly but certainly wakes” (“Reification” 175).
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