



# Neo-Victorian Things

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Re-imagining Nineteenth-Century  
Material Cultures in Literature and  
Film

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*Edited by*

Sarah E. Maier · Brenda Ayres  
Danielle Mariann Dove

palgrave  
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*To lovers of Victorian things*

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# Introduction: Stuff and Things: Introducing Neo-Victorian Materialities

*Danielle Mariann Dove and Sarah E. Maier*

Person, place or thing? To remix the age-old game, we can rephrase it to consider the significance of a thing in its place and its person(s). The material object and its placement as well as who owns, takes, steals, uses or admires its very thingness has tremendous importance for the culture in which it exists. Andrew Miller believes that the “Victorian novel provides us with the most graphic and enduring images of the power of commodities to affect the varied activities and attitudes of individual and social experience” (1995, 7); the question then becomes how do those same commodities—things and/or objects—appear in neo-Victorian narratives and do they retain their powerful effect with the follow-up and if so, how. It may be that a cigar is just a cigar, but a materialist reading would be able to tell us about the person and place, as well as the thing.

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This collection of essays reflects the increasing interest in nineteenth-century things as well as the recent rereading of those things into the neo-Victorian cultural forms that they have inspired, animated and even haunted. Material things in neo-Victorian multimedia—be it fiction or adaptations—are key to establishing a visceral, tactile and/or emotional relationship with the Victorian past to encourage the exploration of the experiential, symbolic and affective potential of neo-Victorian thingness. What follows is a wide range of critical discussions on the neo-Victorian representation of the past through a consideration of materiality—the very representation of objects so essential to establishing a connection with the Victorian past. In charting the remediation of Victorian material culture in a variety of neo-Victorian media, *Neo-Victorian Things: Reimagining Nineteenth-Century Material Cultures in Literature and Film* asks how and to what extent such narratives create and convey the materiality of the past. In addition, it investigates how current critical work on emergent strands of material culture and Thing Theory—including new materialism, object-oriented ontology and sensory studies—might be productive tools for critical considerations of our enduring fascination with the stuff of the nineteenth century.

The literary and cinematic texts discussed here are, to borrow Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s well-established definition of neo-Victorianism, “in some respect ... *self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, re(discovery) and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*” (2010, 4; emphasis in original). In each case, the text returns to and revises the nineteenth-century past to enact a critical and “imaginative re-engagement with the period” (6) that centres upon its materiality. Cora Kaplan’s early concept of “Victoriana”—her term for neo-Victorianism—was predicated upon material culture. “At the beginning of the fad in the 1960s,” she writes, “‘Victoriana’ might have narrowly meant the collectible remnants of material culture in the corner antique shop, but by the late 1970s its reference had widened to embrace a complementary miscellany of evocations and recycling of the nineteenth century” (2007, 2–3). Although Kaplan extends this definition to include “the self-conscious rewriting of historical narratives to highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire, as well as challenges to the conventional understandings of the historical itself” (3), she returns to the important generative potential of further investigations into Victorian material culture. She credits her own “relationship with things Victorian—from the built environment, to fashion, to books and domestic furniture” with

altering her “sense of national identity” and impacting her politics and academic interests (3). Like Kaplan, the contributors and editors of this volume are concerned with investigating the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ “modern obsession with things Victorian” (1).

Crucially, each of the works under study here “prove immersive, affective or nostalgic in their engagement with the nineteenth century” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014, 3). While many critical considerations have tended to focus primarily on the meta-ness—both fictional and historical—of reconstructing the past, there is an increase calls for more flexible and expansive definitions that will make room for the multifarious exemplars of neo-Victorianism available on the market. Even Heilmann and Llewellyn have recast their original discussion of neo-Victorianism in light of the increasing “international and global spheres in which the term ‘neo-Victorianism’ is now deployed” and in relation to recent “discourses around nostalgia, heritage and cultural memory” (2013, 24), some of which are reflected in material culture and others in how they are misrepresented in other media.

This collection seeks to intervene on the question of thingness in relation to neo-Victorian narratives and how things articulate the (neo-) Victorian material objects in their world(s) as well as articulate the person(s) who own, seek, collect, use and/or destroy the focal thing(s) of stories in the context of nostalgia for the past, its cultural heritage and its redeployment in our current uses of the Victorian age. To consider things and thingness—in the absence of or in combination with—the places and persons that surround them is to embody a perceived historical moment that allows us to elicit sensory responses and our fictional positioning in relation to a distant Victorian past; things remind us of the past with material circumstance grounded in reality and serve as warnings against presentism in our critical responses.

The “neo-Victorian archive” (Palmer and Poore 2016, 9) consists of an increasingly diverse array of neo-Victorian things that include not only the novels, films and television adaptations themselves as objects of interest, but also the increasing number of cultural products that include clothes, jewellery, artworks, theatrical performances, illustrated narratives, steam-punk technology, cosplay and video games amongst others. To encapsulate “the full range and diversity” of neo-Victorianism’s representations, Marie-Luise Kohlke suggests the term should be applied to works regardless of the extent of their “self-consciousness, postmodernism, adaptivity, or otherwise” (2014, 27). In order to move beyond a narrow

consideration of neo-Victorianism via the postmodern centrality of intertextuality and self-reflexivity, “cultural products appealing to the emotions, the senses, or a desire to re-inhabit the past” should be included in a more fluid definition since “they may turn out to be indicators of the particular cultural and socio-historical reasons why the Victorian age continues to appeal to contemporary audiences” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 3).

Many historians and critics have demonstrated that the Victorians evinced a notable preoccupation with the material world. In *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move*, John Plotz goes as far as to suggest that “one universally acknowledged truth about the Victorians is that they loved their things” (2008, 1). Similarly, Lyn Pykett notes that the Victorians “were extremely interested in ... making, acquiring, collecting and cataloguing things” (2003, 1) and, as a result, modern scholars have “a relatively new and a pervasive kind of interest in material culture and its meanings and significances amongst literary and cultural critics and historians in general”—the “material turn” in Victorian studies (2).

These material interests can be traced to Asa Briggs’ *Victorian Things* (1988), which sought to understand the Victorians through the commodities they invented, collected and consumed, with other critics taking up subsequent aspects of material culture. Andrew H. Miller’s *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (1995) examines commodity culture in mid-Victorian novels. Almost a decade later, Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2003) explores the role of things, asking “why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies” (4), before Elaine Freedgood’s *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006) considers a metonymic reading of a thing’s properties and history to argue how realist Victorian novels might be read as “critical cultural archives” (1) if one takes “a novelistic thing materially or literally and then follow[s] it beyond the covers of the text” (12). Isobel Armstrong’s phenomenological exploration of the im/materiality of glass in the nineteenth century in her book *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830–1880* (2008) is followed by Deborah Wynne’s reconsideration of the intersection between Victorian material culture and gender in *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (2010).

More recently, a number of edited collections focused on Victorian material culture, including Katharina Boehm’s *Bodies and Things in*

*Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (2012), *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities* edited by Jen Harrison and Jonathan Shears (2016), as well as Helen Kingstone and Kate Lister's *Paraphernalia! Victorian Objects* (2018), indicate the continuing scholarly interest in the material legacy of the Victorian period. Each offers fresh perspectives of Victorian materiality by considering the thing-like nature of bodies and, conversely, the bodily nature of things in Victorian narratives (Boehm 6); the cluttered, disordered character of things out of place in Victorian texts, which the editors term *bric-à-brac* (Harrison and Shears); and the often-overlooked importance of "paraphernalia" or "the historical, cultural and literary debris that makes up the background of Victorian life" (Kingstone and Lister 1).

These editions have now been joined by studies of neo-Victorianism and steampunk that have turned their attention to material matters. In 2011, Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss guest-edited a special issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* dedicated to exploring the imbrication of the material and the visual, while Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham's 2019 special issue of *Victoriographies* explores the "affective power invested in objects and remnants from the past, which operate as mediators between past and present" (220). In *Epistolary Encounters* (2013), Kym Brindle refers to the materiality of diaries and handwriting, while Antonija Primorac's *Neo-Victorianism on Screen* (2018) focuses on the meaning of objects, including bird cages and crinolines, in neo-Victorian films. In addition, there have been several book sections and individual essays published on neo-Victorian things. Beth Palmer's essay, asking "Are the Victorians Still with Us?" in the contemporary legacy of Victorian sensation novels, examines how print culture "mediates the past" and argues that "twenty-first-century pastiches" by "writers like Sarah Waters and Michael [*sic*] Faber take up the sensation novels' awareness of material culture" (2009, 87). Stefania Forlini focuses on objects in steampunk literature and culture in relation to science and technology studies (2010); Anne Enderwitz and Doris Feldmann (2014) explore the link between nostalgia and material culture in the BBC adaptation of *Cranford* and Sara K. Day (2018) examines materiality, commodification and the formation of the canon in neo-Victorian children's books.

Despite this rising interest in the material object, there has not yet been a volume focused entirely on neo-Victorian things. Our volume seeks to address this lack and expand on the above instances by bringing together new scholarship on neo-Victorian objects, things and materiality in light

of theoretical and methodological developments in new materialism, object-oriented ontology, phenomenology and sensory studies. By turning to new and relatively underexplored strands of neo-Victorian materiality—including opium paraphernalia, slave ships, clothing and biographical objects—and interrogating the critical role such objects play in reconstructing the past, *Neo-Victorian Things* offers ways of thinking about how mis/apprehensions of material culture in the nineteenth century continue to shape the present understanding of things.

### A MATERIAL EXAMPLE: *THE VICTORIAN CHAISE-LONGUE*

The neo-Victorian genre developed over the second half of the twentieth century. Michael Sadleir's *Fanny by Gaslight* (1940), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are considered to be among its earliest progenitors (Gilmour 2000, 189). One lesser known, early text is Marghanita Laski's novella, *The Victorian Chaise-longue* (1953), through which it is possible to achieve a demonstrative reading of the thing in neo-Victorian fiction.

Described by P. D. James in the preface as “one of the most skilfully-told and terrifying short novels of its decade” (1999, v), the story recounts the tale of Melanie Langdon, a young woman living in mid-twentieth-century London, who falls asleep on a Victorian chaise-longue only to awake on the same chaise-longue in 1865 trapped in the dying body of a “fallen” and consumptive Victorian invalid, Milly Baines. Read in relation to the trope of time-travel and situated as a dramatisation of woman's enduring struggle for autonomy in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Kohlke 2012, 229; Saverio Tomaiuolo 2018, 2), *The Victorian Chaise-longue* likewise demonstrates the significance that the material world holds for neo-Victorian renderings of the past.

In the opening pages of the tale set in the 1950s, the reader encounters Melanie who convalesces from tuberculosis and the birth of her first baby while doted upon by her husband and doctor. Eager to depart her sick room, she is moved to the drawing room where she rests upon a Victorian chaise-longue she has recently purchased from an antique shop and installed in her marital home but which is

ugly and clumsy and extraordinary, nearly seven feet long and proportionately wide. The head and foot ends of the seat curled round a little as though to meet each other, raising, above the elaborately carved legs and frame, a

superstructure of wine-red crimson felt. At the right-hand end a curved padded support rolled backwards on curlicues of carving and a carved framework supported padding to halfway down the back. ... berlin-wool cross-stitch embroidery ... sprawled in bright gigantic roses over the shabby felt, over the curved half-back and right from the top of the head-rest to the very end of the seat. (Laski 1999 [1953], 12–13)

Despite its bizarre appearance, Melanie reports experiencing a “profound want of this Victorian sofa” (Laski 18), reflecting the central desire of neo-Victorianism: “to know and to ‘own’ the Victorian past through its remains: the physical and written forms that are its material history” (Kaplan 1). Melanie’s desire for the old thing goes beyond mere ownership when she attempts to explain “her body’s need to lie on the Victorian chaise-longue” because after Melanie touches it, she has “an overwhelming assurance, or was it a memory, of another body that painfully crushed hers into the berlin-wool” even though “she had never lain on the chaise-longue yet” (Laski 19). Her affective, sensual and intensely uncanny response to the chaise-longue portends the dramatic moment in which it becomes a material medium of transmission that transports her back in time to the late nineteenth century.

When Melanie awakens, she is instantly alerted to the change in her situation by the materiality of her surroundings: “The touch and the smell and the darkness, all were strange” (23). She notes the old-fashioned 1860s gown that Melanie/Milly’s sister, Adelaide, wears, as well as the “conglomeration of crowded, tasteless, worthless objects on the overmantel” redolent with “what you’d see in a [1950s] junk-shop, jostled in an open tray on the pavement on Saturday morning, anything for half-a-crown” (30). Her twentieth-century disdain for the Victorians’ unfashionable clutter is clear even as the objects remind her of her husband and their time together when “antique-shops, or junk-shops, as they called them, were their common hobby” (16). While objects seem to provide a bridge between Melanie/Milly’s memories of the past and the moment of the present, they prove useless when she attempts to explain what has happened to her via recourse to her own object world: “Wireless, she screamed in her mind, television, penicillin, gramophone—records and vacuum-cleaners but none of these words could be framed by her lips” (58).

The most important object in the tale is the titular chaise-longue, the object that facilitates Melanie’s time-travel into the body of Melanie and as the mediator between past and present. This movement through time

via the “protagonist’s time-travel imitates the reader’s vicarious immersion in the recreated nineteenth century, eager to encounter the period ‘first-hand’ in its full sensual immediacy” (Kohlke 2012, 227) becomes the reader’s conduit between Victorian past and neo-Victorian present.

The twentieth-century *fin de siècle* republication of Laski’s novel makes clear the publisher’s investment in re-materialising the Victorian past in both the content of its pages to its physical packaging. Taking the Victorian chaise-longue’s fabric pattern as inspiration, the Persephone Books edition of the novella is adorned with a similar pattern; a note on the copyright page reads: “Endpaper at the back taken from a panel of berlin-wool work c. 1860 (‘berlin-wool cross-stitch embroidery that sprawled in bright gigantic roses over the shabby felt’ in Laski 13) reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.” A matching bookmark adds another tactile dimension to the book, a textual material connection that allows the reader to touch the Victorian past. Specifically repackaged for the twentieth/twenty-first-century consumer, *The Victorian Chaise-longue* is transformed into a neo-Victorian object, a strategy typical of “the marketing of neo-Victorian novels as pleasurable commodity objects inviting consumption” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011, 4). The book then is, as Melanie experiences with her chaise-longue, “the only object that joined that life and this” (Laski 41), a physical touchstone for nostalgia and present-day grounding of a thing in its place with its person.

### OBJECTS, THINGS AND MATERIALITY

Three terms are often used interchangeably—objects, things and materiality—to discuss Victorian material culture and, by extension, our obsessive interest in somehow recapturing an understanding and/or possession of them. Ingrid Gessner, Miriam Nandi and Juliane Schwarz-Bierschenk differentiate between the three to argue that each term “suggests a specific emphasis in accounting for the physical dimension of human experience at the same time it marks a historical phase in the scholarly concepts addressing it” (2019, 309). They argue an “object” is the first scholarly stage and “speaking of objects suggests to study culture as a composite phenomenon, and the term has thus been used in e.g. archaeology, anthropology, art history or museum studies” (309). In contrast, “the term ‘things’ refers both colloquially and theoretically to entities that are not precisely designated, not as yet specified, which therefore often function as place holder” while “‘materiality,’ indicates the concrete physicality of

phenomena not as a property of clearly delineated entities but rather as a different mediality of matter” (310). These three terms intersect with the key critical approaches to material culture that inform the essays in this collection and our contributors’ various approaches to objects, things and materiality in neo-Victorian works. In order to account for the numerous materialities encountered on page and on screen in neo-Victorianism, the essays collected here draw upon the various conceptual categories of materiality outlined below with the aim of opening up a dialogue between them and of providing a means of conceptualising our complex engagements with the material past.

Material Culture Studies regard objects as central to the relationships between people. Stressing the undisciplined nature of Material Culture Studies—which consist of approaches drawn from the diverse fields of anthropology, archaeology, museology, psychology and art history, among others—the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Material Culture* broadly defines the study of material culture “as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space” (1996, 5) and underscores the importance of Material Culture Studies in considering “the integration of studies of the present and studies of the past” (9). Since its emergence in the late nineteenth century with the rise of “museum-based studies of ‘technology’ and ‘primitive art’” (Hicks 2010, 26), the study of material culture has been important to historical and literary studies which hold that the objects which people invent, purchase, borrow and use in the world are central to the formation and mediation of social and symbolic identities. Studying artefacts from the past materialises how people lived and interacted with one another and their material worlds. In its excavation and evocation of the historical past and its enduring interest in the material legacy of the Victorian era, neo-Victorianism lends itself especially to a theoretical approach drawn from Material Culture Studies. Objects, even imagined things, lend a sense of material reality to neo-Victorian worlds. Human protagonists in neo-Victorian filmic and fictive works use objects and things to construct and express their identities.

In his 2001 essay “Thing Theory,” first published as part of a special issue in *Critical Enquiry*, Brown appropriates the distinction between objects and things that Martin Heidegger makes in his study “The Thing” (1950). In Heidegger’s phenomenological approach, the thingness of an object is apparent in its interconnectedness with the world, in the way in which it “gathers” and joins “earth and heaven, divinities and mortals”

(1971, 178; 180) while for Brown, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (4).

The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the narrative of a changed relation of the thing to “the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation” (2001, 4). In *A Sense of Things*, Brown continues to expand his focus on the performative, emotional and affective encounters between subjects and objects by considering things in 1890s American literature in light of the following questions: “What are the poetics and the politics of the object? How do objects mediate relations between subjects and how do subjects mediate the relation between objects? How are things and thingness used to think about the self?” (2003, 18). Brown’s work importantly recognises there is significant slippage between the object and the thing; the relation between the two is often unruly, unpredictable and/or disruptive. For example, in their respective essays on neo-Victorian stagings of crime, murder and materiality, both Sarah E. Maier and Claire Nally organise their thoughts around Thing Theory directly. Maier argues that the many neo-Victorian revisions of Sherlock Holmes rely on the original character’s ability to “look *through* objects,” to borrow from Brown (2001, 3; emphasis in original), while Nally’s discussion of the thing-like nature of the criminal body in the recent BBC adaptation *Dark Angel* draws upon Brown’s interest in an “indeterminate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like” (2003, 13).

Another key proponent of thing culture is Freedgood, who calls for “strong metonymic readings” of ordinary objects that seek to unearth their industrial and imperial material histories (4). Although material objects in neo-Victorianism cannot be readily analysed via Freedgood’s method due to the fact that they have a more distant and therefore perhaps more complex, relationship with the nineteenth century, they can tell us important things about ourselves and how we negotiate the present via the past’s physical remains. Given neo-Victorianism is a two-way encounter, an intentional duality that raises the haunting past to interrogate the vibrant present, there is a certain significance to objects that function across both temporalities as material connectors that conjoin both time periods and enable a way of thinking through the issues of today. As Laski’s

twentieth-century heroine reminds us, these remediated objects join “that life and this” (41). Commodity culture obviously reminds us of Marxist discourse that “analyses objects in terms of how they are implicated in capitalist modes of production and consumption, thus shifting the emphasis from the relations between things and people to that between things and socio-economic structures” (Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2011, 10–11). Objects may then possess and develop lives as they progress through capitalist modes of production and ownership (Kopytoff 1986); perhaps then, as neo-Victorian objects oscillate between past and present, they represent another stage in the social life of things.

Congruent with these critical streams of thought are two further conceptual frameworks that emerged simultaneously in the late 1990s and which have been designated part of a “new” material turn: new materialism, often called the new materialisms or critical materialism, and object-oriented ontology. Unlike the more anthropocentric conceptualisations of materiality noted above, new materialism—which coeditor Danielle Mariann Dove introduces in relation to neo-Victorian dress in her chapter in this collection—is notable for its renewed focus on matter, as well as its confluence of subject and object. A key strand of new-materialist thought revolves, then, around the idea that all matter is alive, and new materialist thinkers often focus on the energies, forces and vitalities of all things, whether we perceive them to be animate or not.

Sharing an affinity with new materialism is object-oriented ontology, which provides the theoretical focus of Rosario Arias’ chapter on authorial objects in Deborah Lutz’s biography of the Brontë sisters. First introduced as “object-oriented philosophy” by Graham Harman in his 1999 doctoral thesis (republished in 2002) on Heidegger’s concept of “tool-being,” and later embraced and developed by scholars such as Levi Bryant (who coined the term “object-oriented ontology” in 2011), Ian Bogost and Timothy Morton (2011), its primary focus is on the object—whether real, fictional, organic, human-made or (non)human. Object-oriented ontology, like new materialism, rejects the anthropocentrism of Humanism in its attempt to put “*things* at the center of being” (Bogost 2012, 6; emphasis in original). As Arias and Pulham contend, such an ontology “concedes more relevance to objects and their relationship with other objects to the extent that the human being functions as a mere translator” because it “privileges the idea that objects exist autonomously” and “argues that they [objects] are not necessarily defined by their relations” to subjects (216).

Together, new materialism and object-oriented ontology challenge existing assumptions about the primacy of matter and raise the question of objects' agency and the co-entanglement of humans and nonhumans. The blurring of boundaries between bodies and things proves to be a key concern in several of the other essays in this collection and in neo-Victorianism more widely. Arias and Pulham note, for instance, that "the new emphasis on materiality and objects ... allows for (re-)formulations of the materiality of the (neo) Victorian body" (216). While a concern with the body is foregrounded in these literary and cinematic works, our contributors also embrace the possibility that objects and things play equally important, autonomous roles in their created fictional worlds and in our interpretation or reading of them. In tracing the independent lives of material objects through these theoretical concepts, here we seek to counteract critiques of material culture as fetishistic by acknowledging the equality and importance of objects, whether real or imagined, in neo-Victorianism.

Of course, one of the most pressing concerns of any study on materiality is the extent to which objects in literature and film can be said to exist in physical or textual/virtual space. Asking how we might "deal with stuff in books," Victoria Mills pertinently writes that "an object mediated by the language of a poem or novel needs special treatment. Is such an object in fact a virtual object in the sense that it is a representation and has no physical material properties?" (2016, 3). The same question equally applies to objects on screen. The neo-Victorian objects encountered on the page and on screen can be theorised as substitutes for the "real" thing; however, they do not always supersede the actual Victorian object upon which they are based but can direct our attention to the real objects of the nineteenth century, bringing forth provocative intersections between heritage culture and neo-Victorianism. Neo-Victorian objects might be said to play with contemporary assumptions about the ir/retrievability of the past in their capacity to bridge the gap between then and now. While the material objects conjured in the fictional diegeses of neo-Victorian texts are not physically present, we argue that they invite the viewer/reader imaginatively and to engage experientially with the past. Through the evocative and immersive power of literature and the sensual immediacy of film, the past is recovered and mediated in the present through a reimagining of material things.