

Course Title: *The Strange Meanings of Things*

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Rationale and philosophical questions underpinning the course:

Students' lives, like those of most of us, are filled with stuff: childhood toys on their way to the wastebin; pillows from home carried overseas; new jewelry, clothes, electronics; pens, photographs, notepads and books; posters and souvenirs. Some may seem full of meanings and feelings—loss, love, regret, information, social connection, rivalry, success, status, family, the past, hope, etc. Others may seem to have shed their meanings as students' environments changed, and they (or the memories or feelings they evoke) fell out of fashion. And students' worlds are also increasingly full of machines with the abilities to keep images, music and ideas in “virtual,” relatively immaterial form. Are these new technologies changing the way things carry meaning? Have past technologies? How do you define a “thing”? Has it always been defined the same way, and how do you classify things? How do things carry—usurp, supplant, supplement, invent, destroy—meanings in Western culture, literature, and individual lives, and how does literature represent these things and meanings?

Although things have always attracted literary attention, and people have always collected them, I am not taking a psychological or primarily sociological approach here. Rather, I am working on the assumption in this course that the explanation and interpretation of them first becomes a central issue in the long eighteenth century. The reason, I suggest, lies in the conjunction of four, important cultural changes. The first is the advent of empiricism as, not merely a philosophy, but a *practice*, and one that could be exercised by a broad swath of people from a range of classes, cultures, and countries. This made things the subject as well as evidence of knowledge, and so of ambition and identity. The second is the concomitant decline of religious belief and the governmental repression of Catholic rituals, which left what might be called a spiritual void and an uneasy perception of the relationships between material and spiritual meanings. The third, fueled by the growth of natural science and the public sway of Sir Hans Sloane and the Royal Society, is the rapid rise in popularity of accumulation, collecting, and the activity of classification, which became not merely a fashionable activity but a nationalistic enterprise. And finally, the explosion of consumer objects and spectacular events in Britain made seeing and describing things almost as important as owning them. The course thus presents for discussion the idea that literature reflects a sea-change in the role of things in representation, and thus of things in culture and identity. This shift moves literature from a world-view centered on social relationships to one centered on accumulation and commodification. However, I wish also to stress how things always embody cultural tensions: between self and community (status), between material and religious/moral truths (symbolism); between the glories of secure possession and the demons of inevitable loss (biography).

This course is designed first and foremost to teach students to read literature closely and to understand the roles of genre and literary techniques in shaping meaning by the study of primarily British texts: i.e., to learn a combination of skills and conventions. It aims to engage students in this enterprise by using a thematic element—things—to connect the readings in the class and to highlight differences of technique and

genre. It also aims to illustrate, by illuminating texts' and things' historical contexts, how both history and its literary concomitant, genre, reflect and shape the meanings of literature and objects. Thus, although there is currently a strong interest in the theory of things—Lorraine Daston's *Things that Talk*, the work by Paula Findlen, Bill Brown, Mark Blackwell, Arthur MacGregor, Lynn Festa, Cynthia Wall, Maya Jasanoff, Susan Pearce, etc.—the course will focus on literature for which I will provide most of the cultural context (indicated here in the syllabus), supplemented by two *brief*, excerpted background readings: Locke, Stewart and Veblen. Literature takes a long time to read carefully, and experience has taught me that the students attracted to English classes like themes (and things), and detest theories. While that doesn't mean one should roll over and play dead, it does mean the class has been adjusted to engage students' interests.

Organization and underlying assumptions: The propelling point for the cultural focus of the course is the “long” eighteenth century (1660-1820); I include earlier and later literature in order to attract both students with conventional (historical) literary interests and ones more interested in contemporary literature. This is necessary for the course to meet the needs of the English curriculum at Trinity, but it is also a way to underscore the question of whether, how and why literary representations of things change. Such texts as *The Merchant of Venice* hone students' reading skills and provide the starting point for discussing how literature represents things as symbols and dramatic opportunities. Since it is a text that will be familiar to many, moreover, its appearance in this course—and early—usefully sets up the initial hypothesis that the meaning of things changes through British cultural history, while also demonstrating—since this is a fresh thematic approach—how different perspectives and ideas about literary texts can yield fresh meanings from them. On the other hand, such texts as *The Collector*, toward the latter end of the spectrum and probably unknown by the students, show how authors in the thing-bloated, post-war world of the latter half of 20th-century Britain linked commodification to a range of social ills (Elizabeth Bishop's “One Art” provides a different perspective on this). Finally, more recent texts, including song lyrics (Bob Dylan's “Leopard-skin Pillbox Hat”; “Janis Joplin's “Oh Lord, Won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?”; Madonna's “Material Girl”; and others students will provide), may help students to see how literary motifs, techniques, and themes both persist and change over genres, times, and cultures. The writing assignments are designed to introduce students to the way in which individual literary interpretation can feed itself on and enrich scholarship from a variety of disciplines. They are arranged in an order intended to give students some practice at discussing literature and mounting an argument about a literary work before the final essay, and I plan to include revision sessions in each section.

However, my long experience of 200-level English classes tells me that students (at least at Trinity) will develop close reading skills with more enthusiasm, engagement and success *not* by following what they perceive as a chronological organization, but rather one that interlards different texts identified by themes to draw out different treatments of similar ideas. In practice, this is usually historical for reasons that the course is designed to show (!). That, however, is the logic for the sections and pairings below.

SYLLABUS

Description: This course (limited to 30 and currently wait-listed at 35) is designed for first- and second-year students as a close-reading introduction to basic literary techniques and categories, with a strong writing component. It is not directed solely at upcoming English majors but they will probably be the majority of the class.

How important is your “stuff” to you? What does it mean? When is a thing just a thing, and when does it represent something else? In this course, students will examine the literary representations of material culture, including clothes, tools, collections of things, paintings, jewelry and books, in a range of works from the Renaissance to the present time. We will analyze what different kinds of things mean at different periods of history, and how writers invest them with magical, religious, satirical and sentimental significance. Readings will include drama, novels, poetry, and journalism, as well as some history, and anthropological and literary theory. This course fills a cultural context requirement for English majors.

Course Requirements:

Choice of two of three short essays (5-6 pp) that students may submit on any two of the three due dates below: one literary analysis, one using research; one a journalistic, “creative” or biographical essay on an encounter with/memory of/ description of a thing

One final research essay (15 pp. including bibliography)

One Oral Presentation on research topic (10 minutes)

Quizzes, homework, reading summaries

Book List:

John Locke, selections from *An Essay on Human Understanding*

Susan Stewart, selections from *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, and the Collection*

William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

Daniel Defoe, *The Apparition of Mrs. Veal*

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*

Virginia Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* or *To the Lighthouse*

John Fowles, *The Collector*

Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*

Edgar Allan Poe, Selected stories including “The Black Cat” and “The Purloined Letter”

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, selected stories including “The Case of the Orange Pips”

Other selected short stories

Selections from poltergeist and witch narratives (long 18thc mainly)

Thorstein Veblen, selections from *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*

Selected poems, mainly from *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, shorter edition, including:

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

Andrew Marvell, “On a Dew Drop”

Robert Herrick, "On Julia's Clothes"
Jonathan Swift, selections including "The Dressing Room," "On a Nymph going to Bed"

Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*
John Gay, Book I from *Trivia, or the Art of Walking the Streets of London*
John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess"
Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright"
Adrienne Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"
Richard Wilbur, "Objects"; "Museum Piece"
William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow"
Elizabeth Bishop, "One Art"
Selected song lyrics TBA by the class.

PART I: The Body and Things: where does the body stop and clothes begin? short introductory lectures on Renaissance, pre-industrial British society, sartorial laws, Catholic rituals, and literary traditions of dream-visions in which things mean something immaterial that reveals/conceals a moral truth; the eighteenth-century influx of cloth goods; changing notions of cleanliness and the borders of bodies and things; and modern theory on clothes, bodies and identity.

Readings for Weeks 1, 2 and 3:

John Locke, from *Essay on Human Understanding*
Shakespeare, Sonnet 18 "Shall I compare thee to a summer' day?"
Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*
Robert Herrick, "On Julia's Clothes"
Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, Cantos I and II
Madonna, "Material Girl"
Jonathan Swift, "The Dressing-room," "The Ivory Table-Book," "A Nymph Going to Bed," etc.
Bob Dylan, "Leopard-skin Pillbox Hat"
Students' selected song lyrics
John Gay, Book I from *Trivia; the Art of Walking the Streets of London*

Final day of week 3: First essay due.

PART II: Things, Spirits and Sins: where does the material begin and end? how can thing embody evil? short introductory lectures on the repression of superstition in the 18thc, witches, devils, empiricism, the Royal Society and the rise of science.

Readings for Weeks 4, 5 and 6:

Andrew Marvell, "On a Dew Drop"
Daniel Defoe, "The Apparition of Mrs. Veal"
John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"
Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, Canto III-V.
Poltergeist narrative, "The Lambs Inn Ghost"
Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Case of the Orange Pips"

Students' selected song lyrics

Final day of week 6: Second essay due.

PART III: Collecting Things: when does possessing something possess you? how can ownership change the owner's personality or identity? Short introductory lecture on Victorian culture and the history of auctions and collecting.

Readings for Weeks 7, 8 and 9:

Veblen, selections from *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

Robert Browning, "My Last Duchess"

Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat" and "The Purloined Letter"

Robert Frost, "The Gift Outright"

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*

John Fowles, *The Collector*

Janis Joplin, "Lord Won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?"

Students' selected song lyrics

Final day of week 6: Third essay due.

PART IV: Remembered Things: are things what one remembers them to be? how do they furnish the mind and shape the idea of the past? short introductory lecture on WWI.

Readings for Weeks 7, 8 and 9:

Susan Stewart, selections from *On Longing*

Virginia Woolf, *Jacob's Room* or *To the Lighthouse*

Adrienne Rich, "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"

Richard Wilbur, "Objects"; "Museum Piece"

William Carlos Williams, "The Red Wheelbarrow"

Elizabeth Bishop, "The Art of Losing"

Students' selected song lyrics

Final day of class: final research essay due.