ENG 650. Victorian Words and Things
Place and Time: PLC 253, T 9-11:50
Instructor: Deborah Shapple
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Office Hours: T 1-4 in PLC 365 & by appointment

Course Description

From the object lessons promoted in Victorian novels and museum displays to the recent popularity of “thing theory” in critical thought, the material world and our relation to it continues to inform our sense of self and others. This course places Victorians’ attentiveness to the world of things and its capacity to mediate relations between people in dialogue with current interests in literary and cultural studies. Beginning our inquiry with the Crystal Palace and the Great Exhibition of 1851, related prose and fiction by Charles Dickens, and selections from Karl Marx’s Capital, we will consider early reflections on commodity formation, consumer desire, and exchange. What constitutes a “normal” relationship with an object and what happens when the boundaries between objects and subjects begin to blur? We will then turn our attention to slightly more intimate forms of object relations in the works of George Eliot, Sigmund Freud, and Susan Stewart. What is the nature of our attachment to objects that we collect, or to ones that may not be bought and sold? These alternatives to capitalist systems of value will inform our subsequent discussions of works by Elizabeth Gaskell, Marcel Mauss, and, ultimately, Oscar Wilde. In works by Joseph Conrad, Igor Kopytoff, and William Pietz, we will broaden our inquiry to explore what happens when objects move between cultures in which people value things differently.

Readings

Each essay or chapter listed under the course calendar will be available as a PDF file on Blackboard under the link “Course Documents.” All novels are also available, compliments of Project Gutenberg, as e-texts under the same Blackboard link. I will expect, however, that you bring a printed copy to class for discussion. I have listed below the ISBN numbers of the editions I will be using:

Dickens, Charles, Great Expectations (Oxford World’s Classics, ISBN 0199219761)
Eliot, George, Silas Marner (Signet Classics, ISBN 0451530624)
Gaskell, Elizabeth, Cranford (Oxford World’s Classics, ISBN 0199538271)

Course Requirements

Reading: All required assignments should be completed before class by the dates listed below. Please read each assignment carefully, with an eye toward ideas or issues you would like to raise during class discussion.

Research Paper: Your work in this course will culminate in a 12-15-pp. research paper that addresses a topic of your design. While you may choose to write on any of the selected reading material, you need not confine yourself exclusively to these texts. Moreover invite you to conceive of the nineteenth century broadly, whether by extending your research into the early twentieth century or looking back to the late eighteenth, in order to accommodate better your particular interests. All projects should exhibit a clear connection to the concerns and methods of this course, however, and I recommend discussing your ideas with me in advance. This assignment will count for 50% of the final grade.

Abstract & Bibliography: By the end of the 7th week of the term (i.e. by 19 February), I would like for you to submit an abstract (ca. 250 words) and a bibliography (a list of ca. 8-10 works, without annotations) that indicate the direction you would like your final paper to take. Writing an abstract of an essay you haven’t completed (or
even begun) can be a challenging task, yet one that many of you will face when applying for conferences, scholarships, or grants. We’ll review a few sample abstracts together in the middle of the term. The more specifically you can articulate the critical contributions you hope to make, the stronger your abstract will be. These two items will contribute 15% toward the final grade.

Blackboard Posts: To facilitate out-of-class discussion and to ensure that your ideas help to shape the focus of our in-class agendas, you will each be asked to write one 2-3-pg. response to one of the readings (selected in advance) over the course of the term. Your response should be posted to the Discussion Board on our Blackboard site by noon on the day before we meet for class, so that your classmates and I will have ample time to read it. I would recommend centering your response on an issue or question that particularly interests you and that you feel could generate further discussion. You might view these short assignments as testing grounds for your ideas, which you may develop into a longer essay. You should also feel free to include several questions for the class to consider in the context of your response, to respond briefly to your peer’s post on a day that you are not scheduled to write, or to use the Discussion Board as a supplement to class discussions. Blackboard posts will form 10% of the final grade.

Oral Presentation: During the final week of the term, you will each be asked to present for 5 minutes on the subject of your final research paper. Your essay need not be fully written at this stage; rather, presenting your work verbally and informally will give you the opportunity to work through your ideas and to solicit feedback from your peers. Presentations will count for 5% of the total grade.

Participation: Your participation in classroom discussions comprises the remaining 20% of the final grade. Please remember that each of your contributions to class may enhance your own experience as well as that of your fellow classmates. Your ability to participate, of course, depends on your regular attendance to class. After 1 unexcused absence, your final grade will drop by 1/3 of a point (e.g., A- to B+) for each subsequent absence.

Academic Integrity: All work should be your own; any borrowed ideas, paraphrases, or quotations from outside sources must be properly documented in your writing. One act of plagiarism will result in failure for the entire course. For further advice, please select the link “Course Information” from our Blackboard menu, click on the link “General Information,” then “Course policies,” and finally “Academic honesty - avoiding plagiarism.” If you are uncertain about how or whether to document a particular source, please don’t hesitate to ask me.

Course Calendar

4 January. Victorian object lessons and the Great Exhibition of 1851
Charles Dickens, "The Great Exhibition and the Little One," Household Words III, no. 67 (5 July 1851): 356-60. (suggested reading)

11 January. Commodities, and their secret lives

18 January. Perversions of Ca-pi-tal
Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (1861), Ch. 1-31 (Vol. I, Ch. 1 – Vol. II, Ch. XI).
25 January. Terminal exchanges
Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Ch. 32-end.

1 February. Other values and collections

8 February. Gifts, solidarity, and non-terminal exchanges
Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* (1853).
Andrew H. Miller, “The Fragments and Small Opportunities of Cranford,” *Novels Behind Glass*, 91-118. (suggested reading)

15 February. Intercultural exchanges

22 February. Otherworldly things

1 March. Persons and things

8 March. Final Presentations

*Final papers due by 12 noon on Monday, 14 March*