

explorations



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Marlena Marciniak
Opole University, Poland

REVIEW

Agnieszka Setecka. 2013. *Vanishing Realities. Social Significance of Material Culture in Victorian Novelistic Discourse.*

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928, 95) the narrator provokingly claims that "there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking."

This statement encapsulates the main premise of Setecka's *Vanishing Realities. Social Significance of Material Culture in Victorian Novelistic Discourse* that elements of material culture such as garments, but also interior decoration or leisure activities, may be considered as cultural practices that possess not only a descriptive but also prescriptive quality. Her study addresses a burgeoning field within Victorian studies today, which pays particular attention to various aspects of the material world regarding them as portals to wider cultural contexts.

Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move (2008) by John Plotz, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2009) by Galia Ofek or Christine Bayles Kortsch's *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles and Activism* (2009) are but a few books published recently that contribute to this growing interest. Like many of her predecessors, Setecka examines the relations between clothing, housing or pastimes and

Victorian ideologies of class, gender and morality in literary texts assuming a New Historicist approach, which sanctions treating literature as a cultural construct that both was shaped by and had impact on other social discourses and practices of the period.

The first chapter of the book is devoted to a discerning analysis of the potential utility of the novel in cultural studies. Setecka outlines the evolution of ideas on the credibility of realistic fiction in historical research from the beginnings of the genre in the eighteenth century to the contemporary theories of New Historicists. Her critical inquiry into the question of attaching the status of a historical document to literature seems judicious and convincing, while her choice of New Historicist methodology sensible and well-grounded.

In the next section Setecka goes on to explore the basic parameters of such intricate terms as culture and ideology. After taking a brief glance at various interpretations of those concepts in a diachronic perspective, she presents a more detailed discussion of definitions of culture and its ideological underpinnings proposed by Raymond Williams, Clifford Geertz or Pierre Bourdieu, among others, which constitute the theoretical framework of her study.

The second part of *Vanishing Realities* examines a wide range of Victorian novels to demonstrate how material objects, such as elements of female apparel, decoration and arrangement of the domestic space, as well as free-time activities contributed to the process of constant production and reproduction of meaning in Victorian conceptualizations of gentility, femininity and respectability. In chapter three Setecka considers at length the significance of sartorial codes detectable in the depiction of given female characters. Her close analysis of diverse clothing tactics assumed by the heroines, who could confirm, transgress or conceal their moral, economic and social status by proper selection of garments, indicates how fashion participated in the negotiation of meaning in discourses on class, gender and morality.

The next chapter, in turn, records the conspicuous importance of home as a scene of tensions between dominant ideologies of domesticity and separate spheres and individual

enactment of social roles. Setecka focuses on furniture, ornaments or colors considering them not only as sources of information about the owners' financial position, but also as indicators of their spiritual refinement and "cultural capital" (2013, 196). What is more, she discusses spatial organization of Victorian houses, which could reflect the position of inhabitants in the household hierarchy. It is worth noticing here that she is careful enough never to claim that the relations between clothing or domestic sphere and contemporary ideologies are of uniform or stable nature, highlighting repeatedly the fluent and flexible character of cultural signs.

The last part of *Vanishing Realities* concentrates on the social significance of leisure activities. Setecka tries to investigate the elusive distinctions between work and entertainment which frequently involved application of the same skills or accomplishments. Furthermore, she provides evidence that apart from corroborating a person's material status, preference of a particular type of pastimes might be regarded as symptomatic of their moral principles and gender identity. Like in the previous chapters, the examination of literary representations of social practices leads to the conclusion that various aspects of material culture could play a double function, both asserting and molding attitudes to certain ideological concepts in the Victorian frame of mind.

Setecka's book is certainly of great value to Victorianists, however it may strongly appeal to any reader interested in the culture and literature of the nineteenth-century England broadly defined. One of her strengths lies in the attention she pays to the minutiae of everyday life which are capable of communicating myriad messages depending on the cultural context in which they are used. Setecka reminds us, in a persuasive and perceptive style, of the ideological load carried by apparently trivial objects and activities, which are embedded in a larger signifying system of culture. Moreover, her decision to examine Victorian realistic novel as the site of interaction between various, often contradictory, ideologies of class, gender and domesticity proves accurate and justified. The only thing that raises doubts is the

inconsistent status of advice literature in her investigation, which generally performs a supplementary role, but sometimes replaces fiction as the object of analysis, e.g. in the section devoted to women's functioning outside home (5.1.). I can only express great regret that the significance of men's garments, domestic occupations and leisure activities is overtly marginalized in this highly inspiring and informative book.

Setecka, Agnieszka. 2013. *Vanishing Realities. Social Significance of Material Culture in Victorian Novelistic Discourse*. Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM. 342 pages. ISBN: 9788323225683

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Contributor's Bio: Marlena Marciniak is Assistant Professor at the Institute of English, Opole University, Poland. She specializes in Victorian fiction and culture, as well as gender studies, especially masculinity studies. She has conducted research on the Victorian concepts of fatherhood, married life and male homosocial relations, as well as on the nineteenth-century ideals of manliness. In 2011 she received her Ph.D. degree after completing a dissertation entitled *Towards a New Type of Masculinity: The Ideal of Gentlemanly Masculinity in Victorian Literature and Culture*.

E-mail address: marciniakm(at)uni.opole.pl