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## Dichotomy of objects and things in the age of materiality: A study of Bill Brown's Thing theory

Shubhpreet Sandhu, Assistant Professor  
PGGC, Sec-11, Chandigarh

### INTRODUCTION

The fascination of contemporary world for materialism has opened up plethora of opportunities for the modern day critics to explore our love for material things and its representation in literature. The name of the author Bill Brown stands tall in this respect. His seminal essay "Thing Theory" in the special issue of Critical Inquiry (2001) has spurred a new fascination to examine things themselves "*before ideas, before theory, before the word*" (2001). His further fascinating study in "A Sense Of Things" explores the roots of modern America's preoccupation with things and the problems that objects posed for American literature especially at the end of the last century. This was the time when the production and consumption of things took the shape of defining national culture itself. Bill Brown's study emphasized the role of objects, shaped by human beings, in shaping the human subjects. It studies, how things, instead of being a solution to the problems, became problems in their own right. In a way, Bill Brown's Thing Theory tries to prove that the present generation not only possesses the material things but also is possessed by them. This sounds so true when we notice that how all our obsessive efforts to possess accumulate and keep things throws flood of light on the strange fact that things play a great role in shaping our self-worth. In a way Bill Brown's study offers a new way to think about the concept of materialism and has paved the way to the development of the Thing Theory. Today it has become important part in the ever growing corpus on objects and things.

Edward Carson Waller or Bill Brown is a distinguished professor of English and the visual arts at the University of Chicago. He is also the principal investigator for the object cultures project at Chicago centre He has been active in the field of research and his previous research was on popular literary genres, recreational forms and also on the way literary imagination is influenced by the mass cultural forms. Currently, he is working on the intersection of literary, visual and material cultures. His major theoretical work was Thing theory in which he looks at the role of objects as different from our common perception of them. He asks how inanimate objects enable human subjects to form and transform themselves and one another. On this, he edited a special issue of 'Critical Inquiry' which got prize for best academic journal for 2001. He also wrote a book on this issue entitled 'A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature' (2003). His other books include 'Other Things' (2015) and 'The material unconsciousness, (1996).

A distinguished professor of English and visual arts in the University of Chicago, Bill Brown, when came to literary scenario of America, came forth with a very thought provoking concept of thing theory. His past research focused on popular literary genres and the ways mass cultural phenomenon impresses themselves on the literary imagination. Brown, a nineteenth and an early twentieth century Americanism, also produced a compelling study of Stephen Crane and the culture of mass amusements but he has most recently emerged as a

significant contributor to the development of Thing theory. Other related names who show similar interest in this field are Peter Stallybrass, Miguel Tamen Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller. All of them share interest in the history, politics and epistemology of the conceptual split between the world of people and the world of things.

Brown's major theoretical work which is of interest to us here is his Thing Theory which states that role of objects sets them apart from the world in which they exist. He also edited a small issue of 'Critical Inquiry' on this subject which won awards for the best special issue of an academic journal in 2001. The path breaking book in which he further elaborated his views was 'A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature' (2003) which demands our attention to other ways in which objects can be configured. Bill Brown has had things on mind for quite some time. In 'The Material Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane and The Economics of Play' (1977), he used Crane's fiction to explore everyday lives which populated their imagined worlds as strange presences. Then in 2001, Brown edited a special issue of Critical Inquiry- later expanded it into book entitled 'Things' (2004) wherein he propounded his "Thing Theory". Meanwhile his book 'A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature' put his theory into practice, with in depth readings of Mark Twain, Henry James, Sarah Orne Jewett and many more that truly reoriented our views about objects. A study of these writers shows why and how we use objects to make meanings or to shape our wildest dreams. In brief, Brown's study offers a new way to look at materialism.

His Thing theory is particularly well suited to the study of modernism due to the materialist preoccupation of modernist poets such as William carol Williams who declared that there should be 'No ideas but things' or T.S.Eliot's objective correlative. Thing theory has also found a home in the study of contemporary Maker Culture, which applies Browns theories to material practices of misuse. Recent critics have also applied Thing theory to hoarding practices.

### Concept \ Explanation

The **Thing Theory** now is considered to be the branch of study that focuses on human-object interactions in literature and culture. The theory has been evolved from the Heidegger's object/thing distinction. According to this distinction; an object is an object till it serves our purpose. An object becomes a thing the moment it fails to serve its common function. This is because when an object breaks down, it assumes new ways owing to our suspension of habit associated with it. Thus a thing is seen more in the light of subject- object relation. This idea was left to be developed by Bill Brown who not only edited a special issue of 'Critical Inquiry' on it in 2001 but also published a monograph on the subject entitled "A sense of Things, endorsing the same views in both. Brown's work came at a critical moment when things were held up less as some kind of intellectual proposition but in the words of Martin Bruckner in "The place of objects and Things in the Age of Materiality" as "*consensual maxim*" (495).

Brown ponders on the seeming dichotomy of subject and object. His study brings out that a thing differs from the object because in the words of Martin Bruckner, "*it is inherently more autonomous, self-supportive and above all self-assertive....things have come to embody attitudes and experiences like independence or resistance...I*" In a way, it is kind of assigning capacity to act according to its free will. In this light, things are seen as having unique agency and a life force of their own. In contrast, objects are measured in quite opposite terms. They are described as being dependent, subordinate and materials that are incapable of standing apart.

Brown also takes pain to show how object world transforms human beings. He tries to prove that how material environment shapes us and the symbolic value of things and subject object relations. Beginning with his distinction of subject\object relation, he writes in his essay "Thing Theory",

*We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, the car stalls, when the windows gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested however momentarily.. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relationship to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”<sup>2</sup>*

The above excerpt means that the socially encoded value of an object sheds the moment it breaks or is misused. We are habitually inclined to look at a particular thing in a particular way. But a thing is present to us in new ways through suspension of habit. It seems from the discussion above that Bill Brown is trying to break with what is called correlationism.

Now the question arises, how the object becomes a thing? A closer analysis of Brown’s work proves that the thingness of object becomes visible or probable when there is an interruption in the circuit. Brown means to say that when a glass breaks-the object of utility i.e. glass becomes a thing for us. This particular glass may have metaphorical significance for us. It could have been the one our grandmother gifted us. Asking a pertinent question here, says Brown,

*“Could you clarify this matter of things by starting again and imagining them, first as the amorphousness out of which objects are materialized by perceiving subject, the anterior physicality of the physical world emerging, perhaps as an after effect of mutual constitution of subject and object, a retro projection? You could imagine things, second, as what is excessive in objects,as what exceeds their materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects-their force as a sensual presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems.”<sup>3</sup>*

Looking at object \thing distinction, we can say –an object is physical entity whereas a thing is metaphorical in nature. For instance, in the novel ‘The Great Gatsby’, the very mention of beautiful shirts becomes symbolic in this sense. Bill Brown tries to bring forth the view that the idea is not to conflate object and things but rather claim that they belong together. In this sense, Brown’s theory provides us with the way to consider this world of objects and things. Invoking Martin Heidegger’s “thingness”, Jacques Lucan’s “*unnamable or unknowable thing*”, Latour’s “*Dingpolitik*” or Benett’s thing power, the view of the things is that they stand for more than objects. Something broader and more significant.

At first, Brown’s Thing theory has to be taken with a grain of salt but an in-depth analysis makes the idea less enigmatic. Brown himself acknowledges the perplexity of the reader on the unprecedented view of things and states provocatively in his essay ‘Critical Inquiry’ -

*“Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory, queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone? Let them rest somewhere else in the balmy elsewhere beyond theory. From there, they might offer us dry ground above those swirling accounts of the subject, some place of origin unmediated by the sign, some stable alternative to the instabilities and uncertainties, the ambiguities and anxieties, forever fetishized by theory .Something warm ,then, that relieves us from the chill of dogged ideation ,something concrete that relieves us from unnecessary abstraction.”<sup>4</sup>*

Here Brown seems to acknowledge that his observations may be brushed aside as unseemly investment in the objects. But he feels that it is otherwise. Rather the analytic observations of the object allows literature to track not just history of things but also the history in things. Later in the essay Brown says,

*“If the thing theory sounds like an oxymoron, then it may not be because things reside in some balmy elsewhere beyond theory but because they lie both at hand and somewhere outside the theoretical field, beyond a certain limit, as a recognizable yet illegible remainder or as the entifiable that is unspecifiable. Things lie beyond the grid of intelligibility the way mere things lie outside the grid of museal exhibition, outside the order of objects”<sup>5</sup>*

Here point to be noted is the phrase that characterizes things as “illegible remainder or as ‘the entifiable that is unspecifiable’” is a bit troubling statement. It hints at the idea that things are legible—the only challenge is to read them. Or else it should be put that the challenge is not how to “read” them but how to engage them in some other way, beyond the notions of reading that terms such as “illegible” suggest. But regardless of all the extraneous considerations, Brown’s work is thought provoking and is enjoyable to read. There is one more phrase to be noted in the above quote that is for Brown objects lie inside “the grid of intelligibility” and can never leave the “order of objects”. However as the essay picks its way through different disciplinary fields ranging from literature and cultural studies such critical framework emerges that is not content with the passive object status. In particular Brown’s argument is against those like Bennet, Morton, Harman etc. who are proponents of object oriented ontology or speculative realism. Says Martin Brukner,

*“ Notice the syntactic slippage that at once reshuffles and equalizes things along with objects, the human or the nonhuman?...thing object binary appears to have lost its oppositional fix and has become recalibrated ,subordinating things to a larger object world defined at once by materiality and immateriality rather than by the entrenched juxtaposition of agency and passivity.”<sup>6</sup>*

Traditionally matter was taken to be rudimentarily inert. But today the new materialists, object oriented ontologists, speculative realists, share a set of general assumptions. They tend to emphasize, a contingent ontology, or metaphysics over epistemology and highlight the complexity of matter in all its relational forms and compositions. Much of their work challenges our understanding of mind/body, nature/society, human/non-human, animate/inanimate, and subject/object binaries.

So a closer study of Thing Theory is actually the study of relationship between things and ideas which has throughout been Brown’s main concern and for him, understanding this relationship is of fundamental concern. He propounds that the lives that objects live are independent of the commodity form that we give them. His readings of US fiction of 188,1890s and 1990s (including Mark Twain’s *The Prince and the Pauper*, Frank Norris’ *Vandover and the Brute* and *Mc Teague*, Sarah Orne Jewett’s *Deephaven* and *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and Henry James’ *The Spoils of Poynton* and *The Golden Bowl*) has brought out that the literary texts of this period are in a way encodings of mass market’s engulfment of culture and everyday life. According to Brown’s study, habit is a practice by which *“human beings establish intimate relationship with their possessions.....our habitual interactions with objects both bring them to life and impose order on that life”<sup>7</sup>*

Further if we study the third chapter of Brown’s book “A sense of Things’, we find Sara Jewett’s portrayals of rural marine life amply shows Brown’s ability to evoke the texture of a literary object. In this chapter, we find a detailed history of museum displays of native American’s working and living among their things. Brown in chapter four of the same work explores Henry James compulsive efforts to present things in his novels especially later ones. Especially this chapter of Brown’s work offers a brilliant reading of how writing on domesticity shaped what came to be known as modernism eventually.

## CONCLUSION

Recently, the concept of culture has been a vibrant area of interest in the field of late nineteenth century and late twentieth century American studies. There has been a steep emergence of this concept across myriad fields. It won't be an overstatement if we say that Brown's study has certainly contributed to the development of this field. It is pertinent to mention here that unlike Raymond Williams book "Culture and Anarchy" Brown's work is very much a book of literary criticism. While going through the pages of his works and articles, one notices that his own reading practice is so deeply shaped, inspired and haunted by representation of the very objects it discusses. To put in the words of Gustav T. Stadler's review of Brown's sense of things, (of Haverford college)

*"Brown is more fully attentive than perhaps any other critic working today to the many registers in which the thing we call literature lives-the texture of texts, the way they signify not only in what they say but through gesture, rhythm and hesitance"*<sup>8</sup>

Brown's work is a promising read for those who are interested in European realistic fiction. It has opened up a wide analytical path for future work. To say that Brown intends or argues to return to objects as the guiding principal in the field of material cultural studies would surely be an exaggeration or taking his ideas too far. But at the same time, it can be concluded that Brown does intend to highlight objects participatory disposition. In theories like Brown's, surely the future of material cultural studies lies. Says Martin Bruckner,

*"Objects from piano to money, from photograph to water, can only become the focus of attention because as much they are non-human act and performing variable roles inside networks of materiality, they are inadvertent participants in material practices predicted on the process of representation."*<sup>9</sup>

In his latest book *Other Things* (2015) also, Bill Brown makes a claim similar to all new materialist concerns. But there have been waves of opposition and disagreement to Brown's views. For instance, Sever in Fowls of Columbia University, brings out the blind spots in the thing theory. He attributes this fault to post-colonial preoccupation with physical presence. Fowls points out that Brown's Thing theory fails to address influence of "non-things, negative spaces, lost or forsaken objects, voids or gaps-absences, in other words, that also stand before us as entity-like presences which we must contend"

## Works Cited

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