Literary Interiors, Cherished Things, and Feminine Subjectivity in the Gilded Age

Bärbel Tischleder
J. W. Goethe Universität

The so-called Gilded Age is generally perceived as a time when a materialist mentality took hold of Americans—a period when their country underwent tremendous economic and social transformations that had a major impact on people's lives, attitudes, and ways of self-fashioning. Indeed, the dominant narrative about the Gilded Age is, as Winfried Fluck and Leo Marx have pointed out, the one about America's "historical turn towards materialism" (415). In his recent study *A Sense of Things* (2003), Bill Brown draws attention to the centrality of the physical object world in late nineteenth-century American culture; he speaks of an "age of things," referring to an era when the invention, production, distribution, and consumption of material objects took on unprecedented forms and quantities (5). My focus here will also be on things and the relations people maintain with them, but I am less concerned with discontinuity—the narratives of a *new* materialism—than with certain continuities. I will concentrate on the domestic, subjective, and feminine dimensions of human object-relations—relations that are embedded in and shaped by specifically gendered interiors. In this paper, "interiority" denotes both subjectivity and interior space, and I explore the connections between spatial, material, and psychic aspects of interiority, including the inner or secret life of things. Accord-

ESC 31.1 (March 2005): 96–117

ingly, it is the inside of "materialism" rather than its conspicuousness that interests me here—a materialism that is intimate rather than public, moral rather than fetishistic, idiosyncratic rather than narcissistic.

Concretely, I will analyze the literary life of domestic objects in two short stories, one by Sarah Orne Jewett and one by Mary Wilkins Freeman. In these writings, the domestic sphere is the major arena of women's development, influence, and self-articulation, and it is also the realm where the relations between the genders, parents, and children, and, most significantly, people and things are mapped out. I consider the literary treatment of domestic material culture with regard to the cultural revaluation of the so-called "woman's sphere" in mid-nineteenth-century America, which attributed a major responsibility to women as guardians of civilization. In this tradition, the white middle-class home was closely associated with an ideal of feminine domesticity. The contemporary advice literature—most prominently Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catherine Beecher's *The American Woman's Home* (1869)—emphasized women's vital role as "ministers" of the family home. A Christian and moral dimension was ascribed to the tasks of housekeeping, child-rearing, and interior decoration—and woman's civilizing role was estimated accordingly. My paper sets out from the perception that this ideal domesticity does not simply encompass a woman's care and love of her husband and children but also that of physical objects. Like the family, domestic things are in her charge, they are objects of her affection and devotion as well as media of feminine self-expression that articulate her aesthetic sensibility and refinement. While the association of material and psychological forms works rather harmoniously in the work of Stowe, it is rendered more complicated in the stories by Jewett and Freeman where the emotional bonds between female characters and private objects are still significant but have ceased to correspond to an ideal of feminine domesticity in an unproblematic way.

Bärbel Tischleder, PhD, teaches American Studies at the Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main, Germany. She is author of *Body Trouble: Entkörperlichung, Whiteness und das amerikanische Gegenwartskino* (2001), a book on theories of the body, whiteness, and the contemporary U.S. cinema. She is currently working on *Reading Things*, a study on the significance of the object world in American literature from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.

Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Motherly Chair

I will briefly exemplify the relevant aspects of Stowe's "sentimental materialism" (see Merish) with regard to the famous chapter in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* entitled "The Quaker Settlement."[1] Here, the emotional investment in things is often accompanied by an animation of the home's object world; that is, things assume a lively, sometimes even a human aspect. A case in

1 Lori Merish reads *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and other writings by Stowe as characteristic of a nineteenth-century sentimental discourse that supported an ideal of domestic materialism—a discourse that stresses the psychological and spiritual significance of domestic objects in the emotional economy of the self and that

The chair and the woman seem inseparable; the thing has assumed the affectionate qualities of the mother.

point is offered by Rachel Halliday's prominent rocking chairs: There is "a larger sized one, motherly and old, whose wide arms breathed hospitable invitation, seconded by the solicitation of its feather cushions,—a real comfortable, persuasive old chair, and worth, in the way of honest, homely enjoyment, a dozen of your plush or brochetelle drawing-room gentry" (*UTC* 116). Rachel Halliday's chair reflects the human, hospitable aspects of its owner. Rachel, the matriarch of the Quaker settlement, and her welcoming household serve as epitome of the ideal home in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This mother and her homey things provide the first encounter with the "living gospel" for the fugitive slaves Eliza and George who, until then, never experienced a true, Christian home (*UTC* 122).

Stowe's animism of domestic objects is not just a narrative or aesthetic device in order to convey a sense of the intimate atmosphere of the Quaker household. Her fictional characters, too, consider chairs and other things as friends or long-time companions closely associated with their own life history. Accordingly, the reader's first impression of both the Quaker home and Rachel is conveyed by the "social life of things." The narrator introduces Rachel sitting in "her little rocking chair," and the character traits of the person and the thing seem to melt into one another:

> It had a turn for quacking and squeaking,—that chair had,—either from having taken cold in early life, or from asthmatic affection, or perhaps from nervous derangement; but, as she gently swung backward and forward, the chair kept up a kind of subdued "creechy crawchy," that would have been intolerable in any other chair. But old Simeon Halliday often declared it was as good as any music to him, and the children all avowed that they wouldn't miss of hearing mother's chair for anything in the world. For why? for twenty years or more, nothing but loving words and gentle moralities, and motherly loving kindness, had come from the chair;—head-aches and heart-aches innumerable had been cured there,—difficulties spiritual and temporal solved there,—all by one good, loving woman, God bless her! (*UTC* 117)

The chair and the woman seem inseparable; the thing has assumed the affectionate qualities of the mother. The family members are very attached to the old piece of furniture and treat it and other household items as living things ingrained with the family's history. The traces that human

constructs equivalences between material and subjective forms of refinement. See esp. pp. 144–65.

use and life have left on these objects bestow a human aspect to them. For the children, the chair's creaking noises blend with the mother's consoling voice into the familiar sound of maternal comfort. But Stowe's anthropomorphizing goes even further: the chair does not only bear the marks of human life, it seems capable of feeling and remembering. Suggesting that it might have fallen ill in its early life, the narrator depicts it as sentient matter; the inanimate turns animate. Referring to the morality and kindness emanating from it, she transcends the material dimension and introduces a spiritual one; and so it seems as if the chair is bestowed with a living soul.

Cherished things in Stowe's ideal domestic setting are clearly defined in opposition to a more genteel culture—to "plush drawing-room gentry." Material culture plays a crucial role in Stowe's rendering of domestic bliss, but not all objects are appreciated. *The House and Home Papers (HHP)* provide numerous examples of fancy commodities that threaten the familiar order of things, because they are "too fine" to be used, "too fragile to last," too delicate to provide the comforts of "well-used" things (*HHP* 61, 118, 11). Generally, Stowe regards fashionable houses, "best parlors," "best china," and "the tantalizing beauty of expensive and frail knick-knacks" with utter suspicion (*HHP* 5, 39, 99). Cherished are, above all, "dear old things" (*HHP* 17), and the appreciation is due to their sentimental value—a value that totally disregards their exchange value or conspicuousness and depends entirely on the objects' close connection with human biographies. Stowe stages an ideal of homeliness which combines a sense of psychological comfort with the domestic location, and material objects and humans alike form an intimate and harmonious order of things: In the Quaker household the "low murmurs of talk" mingle with "the gentle tinkling of teaspoons" and "the musical clatter of cups and saucers" (*UTC* 121). Here and in other idealized domestic settings Stowe envisions, only those things are animated and invested with affective value which are embedded firmly within the family-centred home.

Sarah Orne Jewett's "The Best China Saucer"

With regard to "The Best China Saucer" as well as to Freeman's "A New England Nun," I now wish to explore the ways in which the stories depart from Stowe's family-centred vision of an ideal cohabitation of people and things. How do things come to embody abstract morals or constraints? And how do these stories set the stage for things to be invested with feeling or psychological and moral significance? What qualifies cherished

objects as such? In which ways do they support the characters' sense of self, particularly their gendered identities?

Jewett's short story first appeared in *The Independent* in 1872 and was later included in *Play Days* (1878), a collection of Jewett's children's stories. In "The Best China Saucer" (BCS) Nelly, a little girl, is the central figure, and the narrative unfolds from her perspective. It presents us with an instance of a girl's initiation into the cultural and moral system of her mother's household. Having disobeyed maternal orders and played with a girl she was not supposed to, Nelly has to take responsibility for a broken saucer that her mother cherishes a lot. Most striking about the story is that Nelly's relationship to her mother, to the other girl, and even her sense of self are mediated primarily through various material objects. Playing with her dolls and other toys, Nelly imitates and/or parodies the maternal role model, wavering between obedience and transgression. When things get out of hand, she has to learn that middle-class morality, class distinction, and discipline are not just articulated by mother in person, but speak to her through objects as well.

The first sentence of "The Best China Saucer" informs the reader that the story, told by a first person-narrator, contains a moral and that we will not have to wait for the ending to learn it. Here it is: "Mind your mother,—unless, of course, you are perfectly sure she is a foolish and unwise woman, and that you are always the more sensible of the two" (BCS 255). Jewett introduces, right from the start, a subtle irony by telling us that one should not question a mother's authority unless it is appropriate to do so. Thus we are, in a humorous way, confronted with the moral double bind that will soon define Nelly's situation. Nelly Willis is the daughter of a well-to-do family who inhabits a large house with a garden and several servants. One morning everybody gets ready to leave to different destinations. Only Nelly has no particular plan for the day and is left at home with the maids. She expresses her wish to play with Jane Simmons, a working-class girl living nearby. But Mrs Willis does not want her daughter to spend time with Jane because she fears the bad manners and influence of the "naughty girl" (BCS 255). Instead she advises her daughter to tidy up her play-room since they are expecting a visit from Nelly's friend Alice later that day.

Everybody has left, the maids are busy with housework, Nelly's room is in good order, and soon she gets terribly bored. The only thing left to do is to dress her dolls in their best clothes. It is to be expected that they, too, will have visitors soon—"Alice's family"—her friend's dolls. Nelly herself likes to dress in her mother's clothes, but, since nobody is around to watch her, this is not much fun today. Instead, she reproduces the

ritual of receiving guests within the miniature world of her dolls. Nothing seems to be missing in Nelly's little ersatz cosmos: the dolls have their own little house, tea set and tea-table, doll-blankets, lots of clothes, and other little feminine devices. In *On Longing* (1993), a study of different cultural forms in architecture, literature, and the arts, Susan Stewart considers the miniature as metaphor for interiority, of which the dollhouse is a characteristic example:

> Occupying a space within an enclosed space, the dollhouse's aptest analogy is the locket or the secret recesses of the heart: center within center, within within within. The dollhouse is a materialized secret; what we look for is the dollhouse within the dollhouse and its promise of an infinitely profound interiority. (61)

Toys, in general, are considered physical embodiments or devices for fantasy:

> The toy opens an interior world, lending itself to fantasy and privacy in a way that the abstract space, the playground, of social play does not. To toy with something is to manipulate it, to try it out within sets of contexts, none of which is determinative. (56)

Stewart's reflection on the miniature stresses its imaginary, creative potential, the promise that it might conceal a secret life of things ("on the other side"). Precisely because the world of toys is arrested in time and contained in space, it prompts action, fantasy, and narrative. The nutcracker theme—the toy that comes to life—is very common in children's literature, and the animation of the inanimate promises an alternative world, a time and place beyond the everyday world of parents and regulations (cf. Stewart 55–57).

Precisely because the world of toys is arrested in time and contained in space, it prompts action, fantasy and narrative.

Imaginary Companions

A lot of inanimate objects are animated in Jewett's story, too, but they do not fulfill the promise of a secret, alternative life of things. Quite the opposite: Nelly's dolls, particularly Amelia, her favourite one, hardly inspire her to contrive new worlds or different contexts. She turns to them only after having convinced herself that there is really nothing else left to do:

> Anything was better than sitting there, so she went to the doll's house and took dear Amelia, who had a very fair complexion and light hair, and looked so faded that Nelly always said she was ill. Poor thing! she had to take such quantities of

> medicine, and go without her dinner and stay in bed half her time. When she sat up it was only in an easy-chair, with pillows behind her and one of the largest doll's blankets wrapped around her; and when she went out, she was made into such a bundle with shawls that I am afraid the fresh air did her no good. (BCS 256)

Among all objects, dolls lend themselves best for animism and anthropomorphizing. Given their human, often childlike anatomy, dolls are, together with stuffed animals, among the group of things that can serve children as "imaginary companions," as they are called in psychological studies. According to general definitions, imaginary companions are fantasy figures that are given proper names by the child, are talked to, played with, and have a certain reality for the child for a longer period of time. They often share the same sex and age with the child (cf. Habermas 268–69). In some cases, such characters invented by children are projected onto dolls or other toys. These psychological characteristics correspond to the relationship Nelly maintains with her doll Amelia. Nelly is obviously attached to her doll, but, more importantly, Amelia gives her the opportunity to switch roles and take on the one of the mother—a mom who tends to be quite overprotective. She considers Amelia a sickly character who needs a lot of care. The doll's whiteness is not the only reason for Nelly to characterize her as frail; Amelia's poor health puts Nelly in a position of authority and power. As doctor-mother she appears like a girlish S. Weir Mitchell who prescribes for his patient a strict rest-cure: "'I think I will carry you out for a while, dear,' said Nelly, and poor Amelia was dressed warmer than usual, just to take up the time. She even had to wear a thick blue and white worsted scarf around her face and throat" (BCS 256). Declaring her doll as invalid, confining her within her doll's bed or house, and almost strangling her with a scarf, Nelly is not only overprotective, but she clearly takes out her sadistic impulses on poor Amelia. Just as Mrs Willis forbids her daughter to leave the home and play with Jane, Nelly incapacitates and confines her doll most times in the house within the house.

As Nelly's alter ego, Amelia is made to suffer as much as she herself. The doll is decidedly not a fantasy character who paves the way to an alternative or secret life of things. The reality principle rules in Nelly's dollhouse, and here she reproduces her mother's viewpoints and restrictions. The imaginary companion thus plays an important part in Nelly's psychological development: in a playful, performative way, she internalizes her mother's moral principles and judgements, thus gradually constitut-

ing her own superego while her rebellious instincts are channeled into a kind of hyperbolic, aggressive motherliness.[2] And Amelia, though sickly, is undoubtedly a patient, uncomplaining child. Because objects incline obediently toward their owners, Baudrillard considers them to be "perfect pets" (11). Along these lines, Tilmann Habermas, in a psychological study on beloved things, points out that objects generally have the advantage that one can expect maximum understanding from them (274). We will see whether this can hold within the given context.

Playing with sick dolls is ultimately a rather dull affair: "They walked up and down the garden some time, but it was stupid" (BCS 256). Luckily, just at this moment, Nelly sees Jane Simmons approaching and is "delighted." Remembering her mother's words, however, she turns around and walks back toward the house. But Jane takes the liberty to walk through the gate, with her little brother—simply called "The Baby"—in tow. The other girl and particularly The Baby appear "unusually dirty" to Nelly, and "very naughty"—again her mother's words are reverberating in her mind. Nonetheless, "Nelly was glad to see Jane" (BCS 256). And Jane, the working-class girl, is very cunning: She appeals to Nelly's good bourgeois manners and reminds her that it is impolite to ignore visitors. This way she wins Nelly's consent to stay for a little while. Jane tells her that she is carrying "something splendid" in her pocket that her aunt gave her, but she does not tell our protagonist what it is. Even though she does not admit it, this "pocket full of something" interests Nelly a great deal, but Jane makes her first provide her share for the tea party she proposed (BCS 257). She tricks Nelly into going inside twice and is only content when Nellie also supplies some sweets after having already brought out the "tea-set box and the little tea-table, and a doll … under each arm" (BCS 257). In the meantime Jane has robbed Amelia, who was left in her charge, of her flannel petticoat—a theft Nelly does not notice until later. She is still much more interested in the secret content of Jane's pocket.

In terms of material riches, Jane cannot compare with Nelly. But Jane is clever and imaginative and knows how to arouse Nelly's curiosity, too.

2 Habermas points out several psychological functions of imaginary companions, one of which is to convey a sense of competence to the child who looks after the imaginary companion as a mother cares for her child. Another function is to serve as a moral signpost that shows the child what is right and wrong, asking her/him to play by the parents' rules. Being either stronger or weaker than the child, and serving as model or moral authority, imaginary companions are perceived as a transitional phenomenon—a sign indicating a mode of self-reflection and moral judgement that is gradually being internalized thus developing the child's superego and ego ideal (cf. 271; see also Sperling).

Lacking all the nice toys her companion possesses, she still knows how to place her stakes successfully: She is able to imitate the well-mannered ways of the Willis family. More importantly, she senses what the wealthy daughter lacks. Exchanging virtual things for cookies, she has something to offer that Nelly's abundance of dolls and tea-things do not provide: the promise of a secret, exciting world beyond the familiar orbit of her respectable middle-class home. In her reading of Jewett's story, Sarah Way Sherman sees Jane—and I agree with her—as a "kind of female Huckleberry Finn," and she points out that Nelly—"still a child [and n]ot fully transformed to domestic angel"—is responsive "to the subversive, 'natural' forces Jane represents" (228, 232).[3]

But the appeal of the primitive to Nelly is limited. Soon after Mrs Willis and Mrs Simmons—as the girls address each other—sat down at the tea-table, the former discovers something very revolting at her companion's neck: "It was a necklace of flies, on a long piece of white thread, to which the needle was still hanging. Oh! those dozens of poor flies. Some were dead, but others faintly buzzed" (BCS 258). This "heathenish decoration" is too much for Mrs Willis. Ignoring Jane's cheeky offer to "string" her some flies, too, she tells her that she must leave. "They let them stick on papers and die, in your house" (BCS 258), retorts Jane, thus challenging the distinction between the Willis's genteel decency and her own crudeness—a distinction that Nelly takes for granted.

The Poetics of China

Just before they leave, the Baby grabs the china saucer and a little cream pitcher from Nelly's tea set, stumbles, and falls over. Both pieces of china go to pieces. "'What *will* mamma say?' said Nelly. 'O Jane! it is one of the very best saucers that she likes so much" (BCS 258). To Nelly this mishap is a horrible tragedy. She deplores the loss of her "dear cream-pitcher" but much worse is the fact that she feels terribly guilty about her mother's best china saucer. Jane, afraid, has hurried home and Nelly is left alone with her dolls that do nothing to comfort her. "It was very lonely. The dolls, in their best dresses, sat around the tea-table, and Nelly was almost provoked with them for looking just as they always did, and sitting up so straight and consequential when such a terrible thing had happened. Amelia, at least, ought to have been sympathizing, for was she not regretting the loss of her new petticoat?" (BCS 259). Jane is confronted with her doll's cruel indif-

3 Sherman's "Party Out of Bounds," is, to my knowledge, the only other interpretation of the story that exists to date.

ference. While never having been a particularly lively character anyway, her imaginary companion now forsakes her entirely. The thing exhibits its inanimate features—its cruel thingness—and the deadly character of Amelia's whiteness comes to the fore.[4] In times of crisis, Nelly's sympathy proves to be a one-sided investment.

But are the dolls really impartial? Their posture suggests that the familiar roles between Nelly and Amelia have changed: it is the doll that—sitting up "straight and consequential" (BCS 259)—appears like an embodiment of maternal disapproval, thus mocking her girlish "mother." Alone and discouraged by the things' silent accusation, Nelly resolves to hide the pieces of china in one of her bureau drawers. Thereafter she is unable to enjoy herself or Alice's visit: guilt-ridden, she is constantly worried and afraid that someone might go into her room and discover her shameful little secret. And at night the broken things return:

> Nelly dreamed that she saw the funeral procession of the best china saucer.... It was plain that he [the saucer] had been a favorite in the china-closet, for there was such a large attendance. Even the great punch-bowl had come from off the side-board, and that was a great honor. The silver was always locked up at night, but one tea-spoon was there, which had been overlooked. The dead saucer was in a little black Japanese tray, carried by the cruets from the castor, and next came the cup, the poor lonely widow. It is not the fashion for china to wear mourning, and she was dressed as usual in white with brilliant pictures of small Chinese houses and tall men and women. After her came the rest of the near relations, walking two and two, and after them the punch-bowl, looking large and grand, and as if he felt very sorry. It was a large elegant company, and reached from Nelly's door far along the hall, to the head of the staircase, and how much farther than that she could not see. (BCS 259–60)

This funeral procession is an instance of the complex ways in which material objects can be invested with psychic life. Picture this assembly of life and death: inanimate things become animate in order to carry to the grave one of those things that recently died. In her dream, Nelly even worries that some of the china in the procession could "trip and fall" or "one of the heavy soup-tureens [might] go crashing down among the rest" (BCS 260).

It is the doll that appears like an embodiment of maternal disapproval, thus mocking her girlish "mother."

4 In his study on whiteness in Western visual culture, Richard Dyer has shown that death is one of the many connotations of whiteness. See esp. pp. 207–23.

The bizarre deadly animation, along with the paradoxical fear that dead things might repeat the baby's mistake and die, is, of course, more than just the expression of a child's vivid imagination. It is also an illustration of how Nelly's bad conscience fantastically "materializes," generating imaginary objects that are symptomatic of the disciplinary process she undergoes. All things, dead or alive, have turned against her and changed over to her mother's side. Even the drawer that kept her secret for an afternoon has betrayed her. Following Gaston Bachelard, one can consider the latter as a violation of Nelly's most intimate space. In his *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard regards drawers, chests, and wardrobes as "veritable organs of the secret psychological life. Indeed, without these 'objects' and a few others in equally high favour, our intimate life would lack a model of intimacy. They are hybrid objects, subject objects. Like us, through us and for us, they have a quality of intimacy" (78).

Considering Nelly's fate from this perspective, it becomes evident that she is not granted an inner life of her own within the family dwelling. Like the doll's house, her drawer does not belong to her in the sense that her secret is well hidden there. For Nelly the secret life of things—her dream of the china's nocturnal parade—does not entail Stewart's promise of an unchecked interiority or indeterminate contexts for experimentation. In Mamma's house there is no space for toying around. On the contrary: the mourning cup—white, widowed, female—is the thingified equivalent to dead white Amelia and both embody mother's moral authority. Not intimacy, but the tyranny of intimacy—the tyranny of things—reigns in this house.[5] So it comes as no surprise that the procession leads straight to a confession. Mrs Willis is "very sorry" about the broken saucer but she mainly pities the naughty Jane who cannot be helped while Nelly is left wondering "what it was that Jane had in her pocket for the party" (BCS 260).

These are the last words of the story. There is no doubt that playing with Jane has come to an end and that Mrs Willis has reasserted herself, and, yet, the narrative points beyond its own limits: there remains a secret that could not be disclosed—a mysterious something which still prompts Nelly's fantasy. How does that affect the story's moral? In my view, it is this glimpse, the girl's subdued imagination of a different world outside the confining moral order of things, that articulates Jewett's subtle criticism of

5 For an in-depth discussion of the "tyranny of things" as a critical aspect of human object-relations and an emerging issue of cultural debate in the Gilded Age see Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things*, especially his chapter on Mark Twain, pp. 21–50.

genteel respectability and class prejudice. I do not believe that it challenges the moral entirely, but the story's message is clearly ambivalent.

What I find most fascinating about "The Best China Saucer" is the way in which it stages material objects as embodiments of moral authority—as a kind of panoptic power in Michel Foucault's sense. The mother herself is hardly present in the story; even the final confession is prompted by (imaginary) things, not persons. Jewett presents a domestic scene in which the child is faced with her mother's disciplinary force via the material structure of the object world. What, then, is the particular quality of these things that help to produce docile subjects (to employ another Foucauldian term)? So far I have followed the story's narrative development very closely, presenting my interpretation along the way. I think it is worth while to step back from the text and consider the question of what I will call "disciplinary objects" from a more theoretical point of view. How is it that material objects come to embody social forces? Is it simply projection onto dead matter? A hallucinatory investment in things?

Disciplinary Objects—Bruno Latour's Theory of Sociotechnical Artifacts

I will suggest a theoretical approach that might not seem very appropriate at first, but I think it can be used for the benefit of literary analysis in the given context: the thing theory developed in the social studies of technology (or what in German is called *Techniksoziologie*). Bruno Latour probably is the most prominent figure in this field; of particular interest to me is his work on everyday objects like hotel keys, electric door-openers, speed bumps, or the so-called Berlin key addressed below. Technology studies in the social sciences are concerned with the *inside* or "blackbox" of technology, that is, with the socio-cultural objectives, interests, and uses which are imbedded in objects themselves. At stake is the question of "the politics of artifacts" (cf. Winner, Joerges). A point of departure for these studies is the notion that, in the course of history, parts of the social fabric of modern societies are externalized into technological structures—a transformation of the social that is not recognized as such in everyday life. As a result, social norms are inscribed in technical objects and delineate their normative character. Accordingly, the handling of such devices is defined by certain material or practical constraints. The German term *Sachzwang* is more telling in this context because it connotes both "thingness" and "objective," "neutral," "unalterable."

"[T]hings do not exist without being full of people, and the more modern and complicated they are, the more people swarm through

them," states Latour in his essay "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things" (10). The Berlin key is a case in point for his notion of artifacts' "agency"—of nonhuman actors or actants. The key's mechanics are constructed in such a way that they prescribe a closely defined course of action: after unlocking the front door of a building, one cannot simply withdraw the key, but one must slide it through the keyhole to the other side, enter the building, and bolt the door again from the inside in order to be able to recover the key from the keyhole. Hence the key not only *represents* a German sense of security, that is, the intention to secure the passageway between the exterior and interior of a house against trespassers, but it *enforces* this rule by the way it functions. The major point is that the Berlin key exemplifies how a social regulation—"Keep the door locked"—is transformed or delegated to a nonhuman actor. Latour calls the behaviour imposed by such nonhuman delegates a "prescription":

> Prescription is the moral and ethical dimension of mechanisms. In spite of the constant weeping of moralists, no human is as relentlessly moral as a machine.... We have been able to delegate to nonhumans not only force as we have known it for centuries but also values, duties, and ethics. ("Missing Masses" 232)

No words, no spoken or written order is necessary, if the object itself requires a certain way to be handled. This applies especially to technical objects like the Berlin key but also to more complex devices like a computer or an ATM machine (nobody would expect to get any money without following the precise steps the machine prescribes). Along these lines, Latour finds many "aligned set-ups" or "settings" of technical things that form a determinative material structure for human users. "Setting" is defined as follows:

> A machine can no more be studied than a human, because what the analyst is faced with are assemblies of humans and nonhuman actants where the competences and performances are distributed; the object of analysis is called a setting or a setup (in French a "dispositif"). (Akrich and Latour 259)

If such artifactual prescriptions work, most of the actions ensuing are "silent, familiar, incorporated (in human or nonhuman bodies)" ("Missing Masses" 240). Here, Latour comes closest to Foucault's notion of bio power, except that the former considers the forces at work as an "assembly" composed of humans and artifacts.

I see one major flaw in Latour's theory: his claim that social power is often delegated to technical artifacts implies that a socio-cultural law or morality is translated into a "silent" mechanism that imposes certain behaviours. But does this entail that nonhuman actants present an anonymous power abstracted from human agency, like, for instance, Foucault's notion of Betham's panopticon (where surveillance works without a human guard)? Can one really speak of a symmetry between human and nonhuman competences? Latour's own examples suggest otherwise: all the mundane objects he examines cannot be accounted for in terms of an "anonymous history of humble things" as Siegfried Giedion understands his study of the process of mechanization. Latour's things—this is the critical point I want to make—are not just "full of people," they are full of clearly defined human intentions and purposes. His notion of translation or delegation bespeaks this clear intentionality of the artifacts in question. The door-opener and Berlin key are designed to keep the door closed; the speed-bump enforces a traffic rule, the acoustic alarm in the car sounds so that we put on the seat belt. His claim that social power is performed by both human and nonhuman actants seems less radical if one considers that the constitution of this hybrid sociotechnical fabric can nonetheless be traced back to some clearly defined and exclusively human intentions.

This is why I want to address one further example—an object that is still defined by intentionality but need not necessarily be used in the prescribed way: "Consider a tiny innovation commonly found in European hotels: attaching large cumbersome weights to room keys in order to remind customers that they should leave their key at the front desk every time they leave the hotel instead of taking it along on a tour of the city" (Latour, "Technology" 104). The intentions are clear, the weight attached to the key is supposed to support the hotel manager's stated interest. Latour discusses the issue in detail; I will restrict myself to its material aspect. The significance of the key's weight is evident when considering the possibility that the intentions of the hotel manager are of little concern to the customers who try to get rid of the key for the sole reason that "this annoying object … makes their pocket bulge and weighs down their handbags" (104). In other words, the hotel guests can be totally ignorant of the thing's inner morality because it is merely its material quality that makes them comply with the manager's request. In such a case one could speak of an anonymous morality—a disciplinary object that derives its moral force entirely from its material structure. Materiality stands in for abstract values.

One could speak of an anonymous morality—a disciplinary object that derives its moral force entirely from its material structure. Materiality stands in for abstract values.

In everyday life as well as in fictional contexts, situations are hardly this simple. I have simplified the case of the hotel key in order to accentuate the fact that things *can* embody disciplinary power on account of their materiality—even if it is usually not the materiality alone that supports the inner moral or social purpose inherent in an object. The way an object is perceived, and the effect it has on people is always multi-dimensional: most everyday objects are not as narrowly defined as Latour's technical devices in the sense of fixed prescriptions, and, yet, they often sustain certain socio-cultural values based on their material form. Therefore, I support the notion that material things suggest certain uses and perceptions, and they do so—this is an important point—differently from the way words do. But usually words and things come together. Objects shape and are shaped by social practices, beliefs, and values in complex ways. John Frow considers cultural and functional complexity to be an ordinary condition of objects: "[T]he most mundane thing, a teacup for example, must be readable in a number of different ways—as an aesthetic object, as a useful object, as the material product of certain highly evolved technologies and so on" (283).

China as Disciplinary Artifact: The Fragile Object

Having thus found my way back to the teacup, I want to relate some of these insights to Jewett's story. In this context, china cups and saucers are also readable in more than one way: From a socio-historical perspective, china tea sets are associated with the genteel fashion of tea drinking, a social practice belonging to the larger context of upper middle-class parlor culture and rooted in the British tradition. Tea sets represent a culture of refinement, polite conversation, and good manners. Thus they are an element of the distinctive material culture of a social class which is defined in opposition to those who are too crude, unrefined, and undisciplined to learn the ways of refined living. Cultural capital is, Bourdieu has argued, always dependent on economic capital, but the self-definition of America's genteel class is—as Jewett's story illustrates—based on cultural distinction rather than the conspicuous display of material wealth. This brings me to the question of value: Jewett's title already announces that the china saucer in question is a "best" piece. Why so? It is made of a valuable and delicate material—china; it is probably imported from China as we can conclude from the "small Chinese houses" (BCS 260) painted on its surface. Moreover, the piece is rare—as Nelly tells Jane "after the fall"—"[I]t is one of the very best saucers that [Mamma] likes so much, and I heard her tell

Mrs Duncan, the other day, that she couldn't get any more, for she had tried a great many times" (BCS 258).

So the saucer is a sign of cultural refinement, an aesthetic object, Mamma's cherished thing, a rare, delicate, and exotic artifact. But in which way is it a disciplinary object? Is there a material quality which prescribes a certain behaviour analogous to Latour's key? Yes, there is: the china's fragility. I consider the delicate condition of the best china saucer as its inherent moral dimension; fragility is not a technical prescription in the narrow sense but it still prescribes a careful and a well-mannered handling. Here, too, it is helpful to consider the object's material constraint as part of a setting composed of human and nonhuman elements: Cultural distinction and the refined conduct associated with it are not just an abstract cultural ideal represented by Mrs Willis, but they are also imposed and enforced by the material condition of a delicate domestic material culture. It is this combination of cultural authority and material "morality" which turns the china saucer into a disciplinary object. In view of that, the fragility of the china is quintessential for the story's narrative composition. The explicit moral—"mind your mother"—is translated into a literal, that is, a material, fall from grace. The breaking of the saucer marks the dramatic turning-point distinguishing those humans who fail in moral terms—Jane and The Baby—and the girl who learns the lesson of fragile china. I read Nelly's dream and her ensuing confession as an act of redemption. Thus the fragility of the china has to bear the narrative's moral weight, and the literary performance of the didactic purpose is delegated from words to things in the course of the story. Hence "The Best China Saucer" is not just a socialization story of a girl who learns about class difference, proper feminine conduct, and discipline but also a compelling literary reflection on the inherent morality of things.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun"

The last part of my paper will be concerned with a text—Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's "A New England Nun" (1887)—that exemplifies a totally different kind of feminine object-relations. Rather than offering a close analysis, I mean to point out a few aspects that form an interesting contrast to Jewett's text. Louisa Ellis, the protagonist of this story which is also set in rural New England, has lived quietly in solitude for the last couple of years. She is engaged to Joe Dagget who—after fourteen years of absence—has returned in order to marry her. She has patiently and faithfully waited for him. During these years, she has developed many idiosyncratic habits. Especially, the meticulous way she cares for all her household objects is

Objects are embedded in a very distinct way in her daily rituals such as eating meals, needlework, gardening and cleaning.

peculiar—to say the least. Louisa cherishes things with a vengeance. But the prospective marriage threatens to end her solitary life because she is expected to move in with Joe and his mother. The newly resumed encounters between Louisa and Joe are characterized by a polite and respectful uneasiness on both sides. Louisa has become so used to her own ways of living that—deep in her heart—she would prefer to maintain her solitary existence. But she does not dare to admit this, even to herself, until the day she overhears a dialogue which discloses to her that there is another woman Joe would rather marry if he was not engaged to her. This gives her an opportunity to break the engagement, and she finds a very diplomatic way to do so. Thus she remains, serene and content with her situation—an uncloistered nun.

Freeman's story interests me mainly because of the special relationship Louisa maintains with her things. Right at the beginning we learn that Louisa's self-definition is closely linked to certain household items she has possessed for a long time: "[T]hese little feminine appurtenances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality" (NEN 39). Not only does Louisa cherish her possessions, she has also developed her very particular order of things where every little object has its place and clearly defined purpose. Objects are embedded in a very distinct way in her daily rituals such as eating meals, needlework, gardening, and cleaning. Tea-drinking is one of these habitual procedures she performs in an almost ceremonial mode:

> Louisa was slow and still in her movements; it took her a long time to prepare her tea; but when ready it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self. The little square table stood exactly in the centre of the kitchen, and was covered with a starched linen cloth whose border pattern of flowers glistened. Louisa had a damask napkin on her tea-tray, where were arranged a cut-glass tumbler full of teaspoons, a silver cream-pitcher, a china sugar-bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer. Louisa used china every day—something which none of her neighbors did. They whispered about it among themselves. Their daily tables were laid with common crockery, their sets of best china stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. Still she would use the china. (NEN 40)

I have quoted this passage at length because it offers a characterization of Louisa and her object-based sense of self in a nutshell. Moreover, it exemplifies the ironic detachment that characterizes the narrative. It leaves no

doubt that Louisa is an inflexible and perfectionist housekeeper—a woman the people whisper about because she does things in her own ways. But the portrayal also sympathizes with her: even though she is not richer or more cultivated than any of her neighbours, she sticks to her refined ways. While people reserve their china for visitors, Louisa enjoys using it every day. In her house, there is no best china—she is not interested in keeping things for prestige alone. Louisa treats herself like an esteemed guest and takes great pleasure in handling the few pieces of china she owns.

Louisa's sense of self cannot be separated from her cherished possessions. The china, starched linens, embroidery, and other "dainty" things she surrounds herself with reflect her gentle, graceful manners, her neatness and her stiffness. This is accentuated by Freeman's choice of words: Throughout the story, she employs the same adjectives—delicate, pleasant, little, sweet—in order to describe both her protagonist and her possessions. Therefore, I would say that Louisa, by "wash[ing] the tea-things" and "polishing the china carefully" (NEN 40), constitutes and polishes her own ego. I do not mean to suggest that Louisa is a narcissistic character but that her self-esteem depends on the everyday ceremonies she performs around things. Unlike in "The Best China Saucer," the delicacy of china embodies Louisa's own sense of self; its immaculateness is a tangible proof of her sensibility.

This is also the reason why the near prospect of marriage is worrisome to Louisa. A visit from Joe Dagget reveals the gap between their respective personalities. Not his character per se but the way Joe "fingers" her things—he unintentionally rearranges her order and drops a basket—produces great discomfort on Louisa's side. Hence his departure is a relief to both:

> When Joe Dagget was outside he drew in the sweet evening air with a sigh, and felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop. Louisa, on her part, felt much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have done after the exit of the bear. (NEN 42)

This humorous portrayal makes clear that not only Louisa's self-relation but also that to others is manifested through things. The scene of Joe's visit establishes Louisa once and for all as an anal character. But, more importantly, it illuminates that the long years of living with her things have moulded Louisa's personality more than any human relation. She has grown so used to them that the difference between her and her environ-

ment has become blurred. Consequently, the prospect of moving into Joe's house poses an existential threat to her:

> Every morning, rising and going about among her neat maidenly possessions, she felt as one looking her last upon the faces of dear friends. It was true that in a measure she could take them with her, but, robbed of their old environments, they would appear in such new guises that they would almost cease to be themselves. (NEN 44)

Like Stowe and Jewett before her, Freeman presents a female character who considers her possessions as "dear friends." And, as in the case of "dear Amelia" or Rachel Halliday's motherly chair, the animated things are not isolated but portrayed as elements of a larger "assembly" (to use Latour's term again). To Louisa it is, above all, the environment of her familiar home that keeps her things alive. Uprooted, both she and her "maidenly possessions" would be threatened by identity loss. Regarding this "domestic environmentalism" (Grier 6–9), Louisa's home resembles Stowe's ideal of homeliness. Both authors stage an interior setting where women and material objects form an intimate order of things. It is this "expressive milieu" (Meyer-Drawe 17), mingling humans and nonhumans which produces the emotional ease and psychological comfort that the respective characters enjoy.

But there is one crucial difference: Stowe's domestic vision is that of a family home. The "motherly chair" is characterized first and foremost by its hospitable and sociable nature; the maternal influence emanates from it. Here, animate things are cherished precisely because they prove to be so gregarious, because they help to establish bonds of love between the family members. Not so in "A New England Nun": Louisa's "feminine appurtenances" and "maidenly possessions"—those things that are most closely associated with her "veritable" self—are by definition not motherly. They belong to her and her alone, and are allies in her final self-assertion as uncloistered nun. Self-indulgence rather than selflessness typify Louisa as a character as well as her attitude toward personal belongings. Hence the ideal domesticity Stowe envisioned and promoted throughout her writing career has undergone a significant re-interpretation within Freeman's story—a redefinition that aligns the latter with Jewett rather than Stowe. Even though animated, Mamma's household in "The Best China Saucer" appears by no means as an enchanted domestic Eden full of friendly and inviting things. From Nelly's perspective at least, it rather resembles the imaginary china shop that Joe Dagget felt such relief to have escaped from.

Like Louisa's maidenly things, the widowed china cup is an emblem of a broken social bond. Nelly has learned her object lesson. As in Louisa's case it is one of separation, only less of her own choosing.

What can we conclude from this tour through different literary interiors? Most vital, in my view, is that the authors in question display a keen awareness of how the complex emotional investment in material objects is paired with an acute sense of place—a sense of both the enabling and confining conditions of the domestic scene. "The Best China Saucer" demonstrates in a compelling way that the genesis of feminine subjectivity is closely related to object lessons of different kinds: as imaginary companions, things can support the ego and strengthen the self-esteem, but they can also become disciplinary objects and Mamma's little helpers in forming docile feminine subjects. What all of the examples make clear is that things do have psychic life in literature; they are invested with and animated through a variety of emotions. By staging vivid tableaus composed of human and nonhuman elements, all of the stories re-animate, in one way or the other, a childlike perception of the world—a perception that does not yet differentiate between subject and object and thus enables a vision of enchanted things. It is, surprisingly, the narrowness of the domestic interior that, because of its limited perspective—a dollhouse perspective, so to speak—produces narratives that still breathe life into both people and things.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Paul Lauter for valuable comments on this paper and for pointing out Jewett's story to me.

Works Cited

Akrich, Madeleine, and Bruno Latour. "A Summary of a Convenient Vocabulary for the Semiotics of Human and Nonhuman Assemblies." *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. 259–64.

Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994. Trans. of *La Poétique de l'Espace*. 1958.

Baudrillard, Jean. "The System of Collecting." Trans. Roger Cardinal. *The Cultures of Collecting*. Ed. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994. 7–24. First published as chapter in *Le Système des Objets.* Paris, 1968.

Beecher, Catherine E., and Harriet Beecher Stowe. *The American Woman's Home*. 1869. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2002.

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.

Dyer, Richard. *White*. London: Routledge, 1997.

Fluck, Winfried, and Leo Marx. "Introduction: 'The Materialist Turn.'" *Negotiations of America's National Identity*. Vol. 1. Ed. Roland Hagenbüchle *et al.* Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 2000. 415–19.

Freeman, Mary Wilkins. "A New England Nun." 1887. *A Mary Wilkins Freeman Reader*. Ed. Mary R. Reichardt. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1997. 39–49.

Frow, John. "A Pebble, a Camera, a Man Who Turns into a Telegraph Pole." *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001; special issue: "Things"): 270–85.

Giedion, Siegfried. *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History*. 1948. New York: Norton, 1969.

Grier, Katherine C. *Culture and Comfort: Parlor-Making and Middle-Class Identity, 1850–1930*. Washington: Smithonian Institution Press, 1988.

Habermas, Tilmann. *Geliebte Objekte: Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999.

Jewett, Sarah Orne. "The Best China Saucer." 1872. *Literature, Class and Culture: An Anthology*. Ed. Paul Lauter and Ann Fitzgerald. New York: Longman, 2001. 254–60.

Joerges, Bernward. "Do Politics Have Artefacts?" *Social Studies of Science* 29.3 (June 1999): 411–31.

Latour, Bruno. "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things." *Matter, Materiality and Modern Culture*. Ed. P. M. Graves-Brown. London: Routledge, 2000. 10–21.

———. "Technology Is Society Made Durable." *A Sociology of Monsters: Essays on Power, Technology and Domination*. Ed. John Law. London: Routledge, 1991. 105-31.

———. "Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts." *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Ed. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992. 225–58.

Merish, Lori. *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Durham: Duke UP, 2000.

Meyer-Drawe, Käte. "Die Dinge als 'Beinahe-Kameraden.'" *Botschaft der Dinge*. Ed. Joachim Kallinich and Bastian Bretthauer. Berlin, Heidelberg, 2003.

Sherman, Sarah Way. "Party Out of Bounds: Gender and Class in Jewett's 'The Best China Saucer.'" *Jewett and Her Contemporaries: Reshaping the Canon*. Ed. Karen L. Kilcup and Thomas S. Edwards. Gainesville: U P of Florida, 1999. 223–48.

Sperling, O. E. "An Imaginary Companion, Representing a Pre-Stage of the Superego." *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 9 (1954): 252–58.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher [pseud. Christopher Crowfield]. *House and Home Papers*. 1864. Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869. Originally published as series in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

———. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. 1852. New York: Norton, 1994.

Winner, Langdon. "Do Artefacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109.1 (Winter 1980): 121–36.