



## Nostalgia for Materiality: A Theoretical Framework of Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*

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### Abstract

Things comprise a paradoxical position of effectual passivity in everyday life. Despite being insentient, things tangibly impact the lives and whip up strong emotions. Over recent decades, things have cluttered closets and flooded landfills. The immoderate exhaustion and accretion of things which is a critical aspect of the contemporary life has brought material culture to the fore in mainstream media and scholarly studies. A plethora of research and probation on material culture and vitality has percolated up into the literary world. The study of material culture reflects a broad array of perspectives and analytical stances which paves way for the readers to dissect *The Goldfinch* through the lens of thing theory. This paper entitled, “Nostalgia for Materiality: A Theoretical Framework of Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*” meanders through various facets of thing theory and the representation of things in literary medium. This study further sheds light on Bill Brown’s deliberations on the metaphysical quality of things and the agency of inert entities that are evident as instances within the novel to espouse the vibrant nature of objects.

**Keywords:** Materialization, Artifacts, Fetishism, Craftsmanship, Antiquity

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Material culture encompasses what archaeologists typically refer to as artifacts, collectors as relics and art historians as *objets d'art*. It expounds purport and exhibits agency. *The Goldfinch* delineates one's affiliations to material things in contemporary western culture and projects a kind of fetishism for antiques. The novel showcases broken pieces of antique furniture and the seventeenth century paintings. Theo, the protagonist obsesses and fetishizes over Fabritius' priceless Dutch masterpiece, "The Goldfinch". Tartt's preoccupation of the plot with objects characterized and menaced by obsolescence reveals a nostalgia for a world ever threatened by twenty-first century trends of digitization and virtualization.

Bill Brown is a leading scholar in the field of American culture. He is known for his seminal work, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Culture* (2003) and for his conceptualization of Thing Theory. Bill Brown in his seminal work on thing theory projects that things are no longer pondered merely as inert objects, commodities of consumption or passive pieces of a collection in art rather they mark the complex affinity humans share with the material world.

Thing theory is a branch of critical theory that focuses on human-object interactions in literature and culture. It begins by contemplating the complex role that objects play in everyday life. For instance, Bill Brown in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Culture* asks, "why do you find yourself talking to things your car, your computer, your refrigerator?" and more poignantly, "how do we ask objects to represent us, to comfort us, to change us?" (*Sense of*

*Things* 12). Another aspect of thing theory examines how humans identify themselves through objects and how objects are concatenated and adjudicated into one's lives.

Despite the anti-materialist or dematerializing aspects of contemporary culture, Brown in *Other Things* (2015) establishes that within the medium of art and literature the attribute of things has been preserved. Holland in *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*, delineates that "the text itself is a thing in the world, not simply a delivery system for content" and proposes that "we must encounter art as things" (144). Therefore, *The Goldfinch* can be comprehended as a cultural object that is contextualized within the material culture by the turn of the twenty-first century.

Donna Tartt in an interview to the *Dazed* magazine expounds, "When I'm writing, I am concentrating almost wholly on concrete detail . . . the color a room is painted, the way a drop of water rolls off a wet leaf after a rain" (Tartt). *The Goldfinch* opens within a focalized description of the protagonist's immediate surroundings: the sound of "church clocks tolling," the warmth of his "camel's-hair coat," a view of "lights twinkling" and "canal bridges" and a fixated study of "a tiny pair of gilt-framed oils hanging over the bureau" (5-6). The narrative discourse reflects the impulse to gaze, possess and hold onto things. Ultimately, in reaction to the contemporary material culture within which streams of anti-materialism and dematerialization flux and flow, the novel's preoccupation with things, depicted through various forms of object fetishisms vouchsafes an overarching sense of nostalgia.

Tartt's characters delineate an acute affinity for objects. Theo, Audrey, Hobie, and Mrs. Barbour manifest a profound inclination for antiques and classical art. At the beginning of the novel, Theo's mother, Audrey Decker divulges how she has become completely enthralled by

“The Goldfinch” painting and would “stare at it for hours” (29) to the point of falling in love with it. Theo espouses his mother’s fetishistic adulation for Carel Fabritius’ painting and confesses his intrinsic attraction to Hobie’s restoration antiques for their different idiosyncrasies.

Hobie who reinstates antiques is known for his adroitness to see the “creaturely quality of good furniture” (188). He interacts with furniture “like pets,” and refers to antique pieces as “‘he’ and ‘she,’ . . . and in the affectionate way he [runs] his hand along the dark glowing flanks of his sideboards and lowboys,” which hints at his obsession for material objects. Mrs. Barbour too has a strong fascination for antiques which is evident through her utterances to Theo, “Well you know how I love old things” (473).

The thematic fixation with old things, such as seventeenth-century art and antique furniture evokes a nostalgic longing for the pre-modern and a sentimental favoritism for handcrafted artifacts. Jean Baudrillard asseverates that one’s veneration for antiques is derived from the fantasy that they comprise a “mythical quality, by their coefficient of authenticity” (80). *The Goldfinch* delineates this fantasy through the juxtaposition between antiques as quasi-living things and modern products as “cold, bright, newly-minted stuff” (567). In one scene, a chair that Hobie works on is conceived as “less like a piece of furniture than a creature under enchantment, like it might up-end itself and hop down from his work bench and trot away down the street” (188). Contrastingly, furnishings from the department store are reckoned as “new, charmless, dead-in-hand” (567).

Bill Brown in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Culture* expounds that “the animation of material things makes it seem as though there is something hidden within them” (117). Hobie believes that the antique furnishings and art pieces possess “the magic that

came from centuries of being touched and used and passed through human hands” (188). While mending a modern joint of the furniture Hobie utters that “the person we’re really working for is the person who’s restoring the piece a hundred years from now” (469). Hobie’s interaction with the crippled furniture projects the correlation that he shares with material objects. The narrative mode recounts the fantasy of antiques as objects of authenticity. The furnishings that,

Looked as if they had pure, golden time poured over them,” expose modernized marketing as the source of fallacy. Theo observes at the department store that “there was something unspeakably sad about the pristine, gleaming displays, with their tacit assurance that a shiny new tableware promised an equally shiny and tragedy-free future. (567)

He relates new products with the vulnerability of the future and perceives antiques as survivors of the past. Tartt’s propensity to fetishize old things as vivacious entities with social histories evinces object fetishism.

Through figural recollections, Welty is limned as a very smart businessman who is fond of merchandise, colloquy and trade. He is an agoramaniac, who loves people and the emporium. Welty’s characterization sheds light on the fading social position of the shopkeeper.

It was that eeny bit of Cairo from his boyhood, I always said he would have been perfectly happy adding around in slippers and showing carpets in the souk. He had the antique’s gift, you know—he knew what belonged with whom. Someone would come in the shop never intending to buy a thing, ducking in out of the rain maybe . . . Or a student would wander in to admire, and he’d bring out just the little inexpensive print. Everyone was happy, do you know. He knew everybody wasn’t in the position to come in

and buy some big important piece—it was all about matchmaking, finding the right home. (445-446)

The aforementioned excerpt extracted from the novel explicitly refutes the modern consumerist model which with the establishing of fixed prices eliminates the human interaction of haggling and restricts the act of consumption to a relation between the consumer and the merchandise. The social aspect of buying and selling things is being further wiped out by online shopping and self-checkout payment systems, producing a consumerist culture in which the human touch between the product and the emptor is completely disguised. Tartt's novel harkens back to an era in which the mart had both purveyors and emptors. Welty, who loses his life in an explosive bomb blast reappears throughout the narrative like a phantom of a foregone era, as a nostalgic reminder of the missing middleman between emptors and things.

Hobie's character is constructed through a highly sentimental frame as “the great conservator, the great caretaker” (848). He is known as an “artist” and not as a “businessman” (473). Theo asserts that he has never seen Hobie, the shaggy owner of the Hobart and Blackwell antique shop selling an artifact. The excerpt, “His bailiwick (as he called it) was the workshop, or the ‘hospital’ rather, where the crippled chairs and tables stood stacked awaiting his care” (444) exquisitely delineates Hobie's regard for materiality. The highly anthropomorphic metaphor of Hobie as a physician for crippled chairs and tables engender ethical questions about one's concern for material things.

Hobie grieves for the elegant old remnants as if they are “unfed children or mistreated cats” (848). Despite the fact that Hobie feels it is his obligation to reinstate what he can, his financial negligence leads the antique shop to the verge of bankruptcy. Hobie who idolizes

antique furniture acknowledges: “I suppose it’s ignoble to spend your life caring so much for objects—,” and admits that “mending old things, preserving them, looking after them—on some level there’s no rational grounds for it” (848-849).

In the face of an anti-materialistic culture and the trends of dematerialization, Tartt’s *The Goldfinch* combats the notion that insentient objects do not deserve one’s attention and regard. Tartt propounds that “the whole point of things—beautiful things—[is] that they connect you to some larger beauty” (849). The extract sets forth that the dramatis personae in the novel are bonded most poignantly through their common adulation for material beauty.

Boris and his racketeer comrades, the characters with privileged Upper-East-Side backgrounds recognize the pulchritude of things. For instance, Boris is unconvinced by Theo’s narrative about purloining a masterpiece painting but when he gazes it he concedes “but—it was real. Anyone could see” (624). When Boris apologizes to Theo for having lost the painting, he articulates idiosyncratic remorse as if he has lost a personal treasure, “I know how much you loved it. I got to where I loved it myself, actually” (618). Boris’ bodyguard Gyuri is similarly sensitive to the object’s visual appeal as he exclaims, “Ah, beautiful . . . So pure!” (754). In an effort to articulate his aesthetic experience he adds, “like a daisy, plain flower, alone in a field? It’s just — he gestured, *here it is! amazing!*” (754).

Horst, a black art dealer and a junkie refers to the painting as “the most remarkable work . . . a miracle in such a bijou space” (649). Despite his oppugnant role, Horst strikes a chord with Theo when he remarks, “the board is thicker than you’d think. There’s a heft to it.” which results in a jiff of shared appreciation for the object’s “heft” (650). Here, the tie-in between humans regardless of socio-economic background is emphasized as the characters fetishize over the

object's palpability that embodies sublime. The more the dramatis personae hinge towards the pulchritude of objects, the more they focus on the materiality of things, whether it is the texture of the old wood, the thickness of the paint, or the heft of the painting. Thus, Tartt has contrived objects as catalysts of social interaction and humanist connection.

Tartt deliberately presents a material setting which alludes to real things that can be found in the real world. Allusions to Hepplewhite and Chippendale furniture labels, along with the historically exact information about "The Goldfinch" painting, evinces that things act as tangible and has solid links between the figmental and extra-diegetic realms. There are many references to real pieces in the novel such as Hobie's John Lobb shoes or Theo's Turnbull & Asser suits. In the article, "Donna Tartt and Dandyism: Lessons from The Goldfinch on the Art of Personal Style" Kevin Michael Klipfel deduces that the references to luxury brands bespeak their depth. He elaborates that:

Hobie's thousand-dollar soles are relevant because they're made with attention to craft and detail and a deep sense of artistic pride. And unlike Brooks Brothers, whose stock suits are offered off the rack, Turnbull & Asser only make their suits custom to each person, and unlike Brooks, the details of their ties are still sewn by hand. . . . Hobie buys his shoes from John Lobb instead of Brooks Brothers because the ones made by John Lobb are a work of art and the ones manufactured by Target or Payless are not. Hobie's shoes instantiate a way of being, his understanding that in life, well-made art is what really matters. (Donna Tartt and Dandyism)

The confab of Klipfel vouchsafes Tartt's predilection for handmade things and craftsmanship. In the article, "Craft Fetishism: From objects to things" (2012) Justin McGuirk deliberates that in



the context of the west, where “we no longer manufacture many of our own goods, even by machine, let alone by hand, the handmade acquires genuine cachet”. Tracing current fashion fads, marketing schemes and contemporary design trends, McGurik speculates that contemporary western culture is nostalgic not “for a historical period as such but for a quality – the quality of long-lost craftsmanship”. *The Goldfinch* contributes to this nostalgic sentiment for the quality and the act of making things by hand.

Throughout the narrative discourse Tartt projects the antiques enlivened by Hobie’s touch as animate which unbosoms her fixation on the acts of constructing, contriving and restoring. She dedicates meticulously long-winded passages to limn Hobie’s work and delineates craftsmanship as an art form through a literary medium. Tartt’s use of specialized terminology such as “Venice turpentine,” “lampblack,” and “gilded patina” renders a calculated effort to impart an authentic representation of the materials and labor indispensable for restoring antiques (467).

Craftsmanship in Tartt’s novel is “not merely a quality, it is a way of being, and a noble one” (Craft Fetishism: From objects to things). Hobie’s upfront disposition is directly linked to his profession, as craftsmanship is viewed through a twenty-first century lens as an upright trade. Fabritius’ famous painting, “The Goldfinch” is peculiarly esteemed in the novel. Tartt’s meticulously detailed depictions of the tactile features of the painting emphasizes Fabritius’ craftsmanship. “He takes the image apart very deliberately to show us how he painted it. Daubs and patches, very shaped and hand-worked, the neckline especially, a solid piece of paint, very abstract” (649). The physical facets of the painting becomes paramount to Theo than its historical significance. He runs his fingertip incredulously around the edges of the board and states:

It was harder to deceive the sense of touch than sight, and even after so many years my hands remembered the painting so well that my fingers went to the nail marks immediately, at the bottom of the panel, the tiny holes where (once upon a time, or so it was said) the painting was nailed up as a tavern sign, part of a painted cabinet, no one knew. (754)

Tartt reminds the readers that the painting is a concrete artifact and that its material idiosyncrasies connote the history of human connection. In the article, “The Thing Itself” Arjun Appadurai limns, “the tear in the canvas, the crack in the glass, the chip in the wood, the flaw in the steel,” project “not just signs of *homo faber* but of the activity that art both conceals and celebrates” (“The Thing Itself”).

The characteristics of “The Goldfinch” are revered as signs of antiquity and authenticity while Tartt’s contemplation on the painting’s tangible features discloses its material fragility. For instance, when Theo gazes the verso of the painting, he avows that “the back was as distinctive as a fingerprint: rich drips of sealing wax . . . The crumbling yellow and browns were layered with an almost organic richness, like dead leaves” (624). The painting’s material attributes depicted as crumbling dead leaves signifies its susceptibility to physical ruin. Such imagery evinces that “what is at risk is not just aura or authenticity but the fragility of objecthood itself” (“The Thing Itself”).

Tartt’s mode of methodological fetishism and the fragility of materiality elicits an apprehension towards the destructible nature of culturally emblematic objects. The first scene of the novel proper, beginning with a vicious fulmination at the New York’s Metropolitan Museum evinces that the arts of the foregone era are at risk. In an interview to *The Sydney Morning*

*Herald* Tartt asseverates that, “I started writing *The Goldfinch* before 9/11 happened. The first idea came to me from the blowing up of the Buddhas at Bamiyan. I was haunted and sickened by the destruction of something that had been at the heart of the world for centuries”. Tartt’s perturbation towards the spoliation of cultural artifacts signals a funk for the dematerialization of history that eventually leads to a lost connection with the foregone era.

Tartt underlines the ethereal tie-in between humans and things by emphasizing the effervescent idiosyncrasy of objects in *The Goldfinch*. The painting instantiates an encounter between human life and the vibrant impression of a thing. Theo’s sense of gratification for the masterpiece artwork neither derives from its aesthetic attributes nor its cultural significance. He is captivated by the painting’s mesmeric power of aesthetic value. The painting’s “metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems,” stir up Theo’s senses and induces his fixation (Brown, “Thing Theory”). “Too much—too tempting—to have my hands on it and not look at it. Quickly I slid it out, and almost immediately its glow enveloped me . . . A power, a shine, came off it, a freshness like the morning light in my old bedroom in New York which was serene yet exhilarating, a light that rendered everything sharp-edged” (355). The cited extract exhibits the luminous vibrancy of the painting, “The Goldfinch.”

Theo expounds his encounter with the painting through symbolic imagery: “like that odd airy moment of the snow falling, greenish light and flakes whirling in the cameras . . . that speechless windswept moment” (432). Permeating the plot with reoccurring images of light and references of airiness to render the painting’s incandescent aura, Tartt establishes a semantic correspondence between a thing and its lucent, zappy nature. Theo surmises that:

Whatever teaches us to talk to ourselves is important: whatever teaches us to sing ourselves out of despair. But the painting has also taught me that we can speak to each other across time. . . . And in the midst of our dying, as we rise from the organic and sink back ignominiously into the organic, it is a glory and a privilege to love what Death doesn't touch. For if disaster and oblivion have followed this painting down through time-so too has love. Insofar as it is immortal (and it is) I have a small, bright immutable part in that immortality. It exists; and it keeps on existing. And I add my own love to the history of people who have loved beautiful things, and looked out for them, and pulled them from the fire, and sought them when they were lost, and tried to preserve them and save them while passing them along literally from hand to hand, singing out brilliantly from the wreck of time to the next generation of lovers, and the next. (864)

The final passage of the novel unravels Tartt's lasting message that things represent immortality materialized into a tangible substance. The value of objects like art and artifacts lies in its flair to perpetuate an existent which spans over lifetime and connects humanity throughout the eras.

Things are designated as inert and insentient in literature and art but in *The Goldfinch* things are brought into life vouchsafing their indeterminate nature. Tartt's attentiveness to the material world elicits an overarching sense of nostalgia for craftsmanship and antiquity. *The Goldfinch* propounds that to hold on to the past, one must hold on to the things that reify its significance. Through the exquisite delineation of Theo's fixation with the painting and Hobie's veneration for antiques, Tartt presents dramatis personae who commiserate for the vulnerability of material objects. Thus the novel pays tribute to the vital nature of art and antiques for their role in connecting lives.

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