



On the Thingness in Martin Eden from the Perspective of Bill Brown's New Materialism

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Abstract. Bill Brown, as a new materialist, whose theories provide new perspectives for the study of new types of things-human relationship, emphasizes the subjectivity and shaping power of things. In Jack London's *Martin Eden*, things become key elements on the road to chasing dreams, reflecting the pivotal power of things in shaping people's psychology and behavior at the early stage of industrialization. The purpose of this paper is to explore the neglected theme of things through an in-depth analysis of the intra-action of the things with individual destiny, social relations, and physical experience in *Martin Eden*, and to reveal the theoretical value of Bill Brown's new materialism in interpreting the novel and call on human beings to rethink their relationship with the environment.

Keywords: Martin Eden; the new materialism; Bill Brown; things ness.

1 Introduction

Martin Eden is an autobiographical novel written by Jack London, which tells the story of Martin Eden, a young man from the lower class of America, who chases after the dream of the upper class society, but his faith collapses because he recognizes its hypocritical and flamboyant nature, eventually, he commits suicide by throwing himself into the sea. At present, studies of the novel focus on four perspectives: first, autobiographical studies, which regards the content of the novel as the author's "psychological autobiography"[10]; secondly, the socio-historical critical perspective, in which Martin Eden's tragedy exposes and criticizes "the hypocrisy of the bourgeois society" and reflects "the aberration and disillusionment of the American dream"[11]; thirdly, cultural and philosophical explorations involve individualism, overman philosophy, existentialism, and feminism, etc., and analyze the characterization of the novel's characters. Sciambra points out Jack London's embodiment of Darwinian ideas in *Martin Eden*; finally, in terms of comparative study[7], Baskett reveals the multiple causes of Martin Eden's tragedy by comparing *Martin Eden* with *The Education of Henry Adams* and *The Great Gatsby*[1]. It can be seen that the study of *Martin Eden* has made great progress. However, in the rapid development of technology and economy, we feel increasingly meaning of *Martin Eden* to the real world: as people's living standard improves,

their demand for things continues to increase, but they seldom think about the relationship between them.

As a leading figure of the new materialist criticism in western literature, Brown's critical paradigm of "thingness" not only provides a model for how literary criticism returns to things and how to excavate the "sense of things" in literary texts, but also influences the trend of "the Material Turn" in the field of literary research since the new century[8]. Based on Bill Brown's new materialism theory, this paper takes Martin's life of deep entanglement with things as the main line, analyzes the intra-action between things and destiny, social relations and personal experience, shows how Martin is attracted by things, deceived by things, and finally trapped by things and plunged into spiritual emptiness, reveals the neglected theme of things in Martin Eden.

2 Principal Component Analysis

2.1 Thingness Arousing a Yearning for Love and the Upper Class

The novel opens with a precise portrayal of Martin's complex psychological experience when he first enters Ruth's house. Martin's discomfort with his unfamiliar surroundings stems from the contrast between his longtime underclass and his immediate surroundings. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us[2], at this point, for Martin, "spacious hall", "bric-a-brac" and the "books on the table" [5] are no longer mere furnishings, but become the subjects eliciting his complex emotions. By contrast, Ruth is the owner of the place where she has grown up since childhood. This "personification of things" exemplifies the inalienability of certain possessions, imbued with the intrinsic and ineffable identities of their owners, that must not circulate and are not subject to exchange[3]. The shaping of Martin and Ruth's identities in the novel exemplifies the close relationship between things and the characters' destinies. For Martin, the abundance of things means the freedom and elegance of life he longs for but finds hard to reach. For Ruth, the abundance of things tells how carefree her life is. The things in the novel brings out the disparity of their status in front of the readers.

Martin's nature feeds the growth of things, "He was responsive to beauty, and here was cause to respond"[5]. The oil painting makes him unconsciously immerse himself in its grandeur, momentarily forgetting the awkwardness and replacing it with beauty. When he glances back at the book on the table, Martin leaves through the books affectionately, Brown advocates the urge to detect some interior of objects derives from the habit of reading, which makes the "object qua object" disappear, namely, you are inside it; it is inside you, there is no longer either outside or inside[3]. Martin becomes so absorbed in one of Swinburne's poems that he forget where he is. "He was extraordinarily receptive and responsive". "Under that muscled body of his he was a mass of quivering sensibilities"[5], things are thus vitalized, and the fusion of the mind and poetry makes Martin see another colorful life, and splendid images unfold in front of his eyes, he wants to show the visions and marvelous thoughts properly, so that others could experience distinct life through his works, and at the same time find an outlet for his active thoughts, his dream of literature sprouts at this time. After learning that Ruth

is a Bachelor of Arts, Martin admired secretly that Ruth is really a woman of flesh and blood, and rejoiced that they could share the common joy brought by the spiritual world together, which makes him more determined to realize his literary dream.

2.2 Thingness Hindering the Pursuit of Love and the Upper Class

According to Bill Brown, things have the dual nature of being concrete and ambiguous, which can refer to either the whole world or a specific thing. In Thing Theory, he mentions that “things were of course the sum of the world”, and here things refer to vague wholes, namely, existences that are perceived by people's minds. At the same time, things can also be those things in everyday life that refer to something that is both specific and vague. For example, “put it by that green thing in the hall” [2]. Money and knowledge as concrete things have a profound effect on Martin Eden's literary career. The lack of a good education leads him to face the dilemma of insufficient cultural background in his literary creation. He has to put in several times more effort than ordinary people. At the same time, monetary constraints prevent him from purchasing enough books even maintaining a basic living, which further limits his creative conditions and social activities. When he sends his only decent set of clothes to the pawnshop, he is consequently unable to visit Ruth again. The ambiguous thing is the unknown nature of Martin's literary path. In industrialized America, pragmatism and materialistic pursuits prevailed, and literary creation was marginalized because it could not directly bring economic benefits. Martin Eden harbors a literary dream, which runs counter to the mainstream values of society. Coupled with his extremely low starting point, his literary ambition was opposed by everyone. At the same time, Martin's poor knowledge of the rules of the publishing industry led to his work being rejected many times. Martin relies almost entirely on his personal perseverance to continue his creative career. However, literary achievement often requires a long period of time to accumulate and sharpen, which makes Martin have to endure tremendous psychological pressure for a long time, repeatedly struggling hard to move forward on the winding road of creativity.

In the society of the time, literature was the marginalized part; money and status were the protagonists. Things are important representations of the social system, by means of a particular “socialization of the psyche,” then, “each society” imposes itself on the subject's senses, on the “corporeal imagination” by which materiality as such is apprehended[4]. The social nature of things is primarily reflected in Martin and Ruth's interactions with the material world around them and how these interactions shape and influence their life paths and ideologies. Martin, as a writer who struggled from underclass, believes that the inner value and significance of things transcends the things themselves. For him, money and status are only ways to pursue a better life and love, not the goal of life. Ruth, on the other hand, as a beneficiary of the social system, whose values are totally shaped by the upper class, sees things as necessary to satisfy desires and to show off status. The aesthetic standards and values of the upper class also override her love, she lacks deep-seated emotional pursuit and independent thinking. The social nature of things creates an impassable gulf between the two.

Brown raised the issue of “the tyranny of things”. The so-called tyranny of things is the so-called “democratic tyranny”, by which he meant the tyranny of the majority or the tyranny of a despot[3]. It deeply reveals the influence of the commodity world on human beings in the capitalist society. First of all, as an important part of the literary industry, the operation mechanism and market demand of magazines have largely shaped the direction and aesthetic standard of literature. At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, with the development of the economy and the abundance of commodities, consumerism gradually emerged. People began to pursue material enjoyment, and the popular culture of this period was mainly characterized by entertainment. Martin had to first write articles that would sell in order to make a living, like jokes, paragraphs, feature articles, humorous verse, and society verse—all the rot for which there seems so much demand[5], and two of his horrible stories were promised to be used by magazines, whereas in Martin’s opinion, these works were at best a skillful trick, an worthless art divorced from humanness, which was in contradiction to his quest for a great literature. Besides, the magazine office was not as disciplined as he thought, his most precious work, “Sea Lyric” was arbitrarily fabricated by the magazine, and his personal style was brutally erased, becoming a uniform replica. What happens to Martin’s work in the marketplace further reveals “the tyranny of things”, which not only restricts the author’s freedom of creation, but also controls the individual mind.

In the United States between 1870 and 1910, urbanization accelerated, and emotional connections between people faded in the busyness of life. “The standards by which society evaluates individuals have mutated, and the value of individuals is now mainly reflected in how much money they make and how high their consumption level is”[12]. In such a context, the moral bottom line seems to be overshadowed by money and interests, and people are increasingly driven by external success and wealth. Martin is unfortunately involved in this vortex where interests are paramount. He is hyped up as a socialist leader by the media due to a chance debate, and is later exposed for his humble living conditions and bad comments from his relatives, which the journalist uses to gain all the attention in order to become a good journalist, while Martin becomes an anomaly and a threat in the eyes of the public. Ruth, under public pressure, chooses to break off her relationship with Martin. Under the temptation of money, people’s moral boundaries are challenged, and sincere emotions and ideal pursuits are often ignored and trampled upon easily. Martin’s dream suffers a devastating blow, and his indifferent attitude is actually a deep disappointment and helplessness towards this society.

2.3 Thingness Accelerating the Mental Breakdown and Death of Martin Eden

According to Brown, usually things can be perceived, and the knowledge about something that results from the perception of an object is what the object projects into our minds. He points out that although one can perceive the existence of things through the senses, it is strange that our realization of the existence of things often undergoes an abrupt process in which we feel some kind of force[9]. “He was not a fame-monger, but merely one of God’s mad lovers”[5], for Martin money was one of the conditions for striving for love and a good life with his beloved, but not the ultimate goal. When

Martin is fighting for his literary career, money is the sinews that Martin uses to launch his attacks on the editors. Money, on the other hand, meant food, life, and light in his body and brain when Martin's career was in trouble, during which he has been isolated. When "Shame of the Sun" becomes a hit in society by generating widespread discussion and other works that have been rejected many times see the light of day, Martin finally achieves a class leap, but the money has come too late for Martin to rejoice and stop writing because he is already broken by life, when the attitudes of the people around him change abruptly, and the people who once were desperate to get rid of him were eager to buy Martin a meal and gain some benefits from him, with magazines claiming to be the first to discover Martin Eden's talent, and Ruth even throwing herself into his arms. However, the "work performed"[5], and people respect him for his money and status, not for the work itself. Through this sudden flattery, Martin comes to a new understanding of the place of money in society, the power of money to dominate human relationships, and the worthlessness of his ideals in the face of money. Martin deeply feels the superficiality and hypocrisy of society, and more than anything else, despair. His ideals are nowhere to place.

The South Seas called to Martin more and more frequently, and he longed to hide in order to settle his mind, but on the verge of departure, he had no desire to go, but there's still a glimmer of survival, "He would have felt better if he were already on board and gone"[5], because he was tired of everything, and his nerves were weary. However, journalists exposed Martin's trip, people from all walks of life came to see him off, and he was given a special courtesy when he boarded the ship, "the new technologies can enrich the perceptual field, disclosing new details and new structures of the material world"[6]. Martin was acutely aware that no matter where he was, people would always know about his literary accomplishments before they knew about him, and that people were full of respect for him, but behind that respect there would always be a lack of liking and understanding of himself. The media pushed these people with the same narrow-mindedness as the bourgeoisie to Martin constantly, making it difficult for him to get rid of the shackles of reality. Martin fell into loneliness and despair, and death seemed to be the only exit, so he resolutely threw himself into the embrace of the sea.

3 Conclusion

Based on Bill Brown's theory of new materialism, this study provides an in-depth analysis of the dynamic intra-action between things and individual destiny, social relations and personal experience in *Martin Eden*. Through a detailed exploration of the complex entanglement between Martin Eden and things, this study reveals the multiple facets of the material world and its profound impact on the individual's spiritual world. It is found that Martin Eden gradually lost himself in the pursuit of things and eventually fell into the predicament of spiritual emptiness, which reflects the common challenges faced by modern people in the face of the temptation of things. Therefore, this study calls on people to re-examine the relationship between things and the individual, to look at the value of things in a rational way, and to commit themselves to the pursuit of inner peace

and self-realization. The theory of new materialism provides a new perspective for interpreting the theme of things in *Martin Eden*, as well as a strong theoretical support for modern people's search for spiritual sustenance in a material society.

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