

Owd Friends: Victorian Working-Class Poetry and the Love of Things

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Love, as this collection demonstrates, is an emotion and a concept that can be read across a very wide range of literary texts and genres, and in relation to different forms of relationship. This chapter focuses on the social practices of love in working-class writing, drawing from an archive of published and unpublished texts, largely poetry, and often poems first published in the local newspaper press. Elsewhere, I have used this archive to assess how the literature of heterosexual love, courtship and marriage changed in a newly industrialised world, in which women and men worked side by side on the factory floor.¹ I have additionally discussed an important subset of working-class poetry which focuses on the relationship between worker and machine, and often expresses affection for those machines.² Here, I turn to a different and equally important subgenre of working-class poetry, and one which has similarly received little critical attention: the social practice of love in relation to domestic objects. How is love for things expressed, and what things are loved in working-class poetry? How and why do poets choose to represent certain beloved objects in poetry, and which contexts inform these poems? How do the tropes and forms of language familiar from poems about romantic love cross over to this genre? In this chapter, I argue that working-class love poetry encompasses a love for domestic possessions, and that the emotional investment these poems are at pains to highlight is a means both to comment on the precarity endemic to working-class domesticity, always ‘unstable and hard-wrought’, and to signal respectability, through emphasising a desire for stable family relations in a domestic space.³ As such, love poems to objects are not apolitical, but join in a wider project of working-class poetics, the effort towards reform, and to frame working-class subjects as worthy of social and political inclusion.

Though poems in praise of objects and possessions exist throughout the English literary canon, a foundational work in the Victorian and early twentieth-century flourishing of this genre was Eliza Cook’s ‘The Old Arm Chair’, published in her

¹ Kirstie Blair, ‘Love on the Factory Floor: Working-Class Poets and Factory Courtship Verse’, in Erik Gray and Pearl Chaozon Bauer, eds., *Love Among the Poets: The Victorian Poetics of Intimacy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2024), 103–23.

² Blair, ‘Addressing the Machine: Victorian Working-Class Poetry and Industrial Machinery’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 28:3 (2023), 395–409.

³ Nicola Wilson, *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 3.

1840 collection. Cook was a self-educated writer, who was extremely successful as a popular poet, journalist and journal editor.⁴ Arguably one of the best-known poems of the period, ‘The Old Arm Chair’ also circulated as a popular parlour song, with music by Henry Russell. Is it possible to love a piece of furniture? Cook’s opening is unequivocal:

I love it, I love it; and who shall dare
 To chide me for loving that old arm-chair?
 I’ve treasured it long as a sainted prize,
 I’ve bedew’d it with tears, and embalmed it with sighs;
 ’Tis bound by a thousand bands to my heart,
 Not a tie will break, not a link will start.⁵

Cook’s poem uses a homely and worn object – title and word choice repeatedly emphasise that the chair is ‘old’ – as a sentimental touchstone for filial affection and piety. ‘The Old Arm Chair’ sets the Victorian narrative standard for love poems addressed to a domestic object. Firstly, the opening will describe the object, usually from the position of the speaker, inside the domestic space, gazing at or using it. The poem will then turn towards an explanation of how attachment to this object grew, moving into the past and recalling, in effect, a developing relationship. Often this relationship with a thing has developed because it is so imbued with familial relationships and life moments. Here, the armchair is beloved because it is so strongly associated with the speaker’s mother: ‘Twas there she nursed me, ‘twas there she died’. As ‘embalmed’ suggests, the chair is a relic. Deborah Lutz argues of Victorian relics that they are linked to the ‘thingness’ of the missing body, and demonstrate a ‘desire to find in and through these keepsakes an active, revived love for the individual now dead’.⁶ Cook’s poem, in line with Lutz’s reading of Victorian literature, both shows us how to read a relic, the empty chair, and is itself a form of relic, a thing that preserves memory. Armchairs, moreover, in this historical period, were specifically charged with meaning within the domestic space. Megan Doolittle, examining the importance of the father or husband’s armchair in working-class autobiography, notes that it was not uncommon for Victorian funeral flower arrangements to have an ‘empty chair’ theme.⁷

⁴ For an account of Cook’s contribution to working-class literature, see Shu-Chuan Yan, ‘“When Common Voices Speak”: Labour, Poetry and Eliza Cook’, *Women’s Writing* 22:4 (2015), 428–54.

⁵ Eliza Cook, *Melaia and Other Poems* (London: Charles Tilt, 1840), 55–6.

⁶ Deborah Lutz, *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 2.

⁷ Megan Doolittle, ‘Time, Space, and Memories: The Father’s Chair and Grandfather Clocks in Victorian Working-Class Domestic Lives’, *Home Cultures*, 8:3 (2015), 245–64, 256. Doolittle

Cook's armchair is a good example of what Remo Bodei identifies as an 'orphaned object', something with special significance because it survives beyond death.⁸ Bodei's contribution to the body of 'thing theory' or 'thing culture' – an examination of the complexities of our relationship with objects which has produced significant critical and theoretical work in the past two to three decades – is important for this chapter because it focuses on the 'love of things'.⁹ He views the human tendency to 'invest objects intellectually and emotionally' as expansive:

The decision to know and to care for some things, without precluding the understanding of other things, implies not only an attitude of constant attention to the world and to people, a willingness to learn, and a desire to love; it also implies an ethos and even a political stance: that of contributing to making a *respublica* out of the society that fate has thrust upon us.¹⁰

This argument about the value of caring for things is, in many ways, very Victorian, in the sense that this period is often discussed in relation to the rise of 'commodity culture' and as a time in which 'possessions became a way of defining oneself in a society where it was increasingly difficult to tell people apart'.¹¹ Viewed in reverse, Bodei's language suggests that the ability to love things indicates a good moral character, and indeed, willingness to be a good citizen. This is exactly what Elaine Freedgood, in her seminal study of things in the Victorian novel, noted of the representation of working-class domestic items:

To represent a laboring-class family as in possession of domestic necessities like furniture, and of domestic embellishments like curtains, was tantamount, in the early Victorian period, to declaring their moral worth. It also promises the possibility of political stability.¹²

is citing Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London 1870–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 78–80.

⁸ Remo Bodei, trans. Murtha Baca, *The Life of Things, the Love of Things* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 24. Bodei and others note the complication of the words 'thing' and 'object' (10). Here, I use 'object' and 'thing' indistinguishably, as both indicating 'a cluster of relationships' (18).

⁹ For a foundational introduction to 'thing theory', see Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (2001), 1–22.

¹⁰ Bodei, 21, 115.

¹¹ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), xi. See also Thomas Richards's influential *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

¹² Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2006), 61.

'Domestic order', Freedgood continues, is perceived as the opposite to the political recklessness shown in radical working-class movements. Her chapter is concerned with domestic possessions in Elizabeth Gaskell's important industrial novel, *Mary Barton* (1848); also the focus of another highly influential study of Victorian things, Carolyn Steedman's examination of the rag rug.¹³ Both critics emphasise what is at stake, for the middle classes, in Gaskell's representation of working-class domestic interiors, and both, as well as many other critics who have studied commodities, possessions, and objects in Victorian literature, focus on fiction. There has been less attention to the poetry of domestic life, and little attention as to how and why working-class authors, inserting themselves into the literary representation of things, display their own love of things. Gaskell, Henry Mayhew, and other observers of working-class possessions in domestic spaces trade on the perceived authenticity and realism of their representations. Yet the poems discussed here, in which, due to the conventions of reading lyric verse, we tend to assume that the speaker is the poet and the thing they love is a real, tangible object, possessed by them, highlight that authenticity in a different way. They do not tell us about the working-class speaker's love for a particular thing, they show us, using the affective resources of poetry to make us feel sympathy for the love of an armchair, a clock, or a sewing machine.

One of the political effects of such sympathy is to make the reader feel the *precarity* of the loved object, and hence of 'domestic order'. Things in working-class poetry have been removed from the 'phase in the life of some things' which is the 'commodity state', in Arjun Appadurai's phrasing: they are no longer transferable and exchangeable in terms of pure economic value because of the additional value they have gained from sentimental attachment.¹⁴ But in these poems, the threat is that these things can be returned to the status of commodities. Over sixty years after Cook's poem first appeared, Lancashire poet Sam Fitton's 'My Owd Case Clock' presents a beloved clock as a constant companion to the 'household crew', overseeing the deaths of siblings and a parent, the courtship and marriage of the speaker, and the birth of his own family. The clock is not a passive witness, but an active and sympathetic participant: 'It's like a sentinel i' th' nook;/Th' owd lad con read me like a book'.¹⁵

¹³ See Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), Chapter 6, 'What a Rag Rug Means'.

¹⁴ Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3–63, 17, 13.

¹⁵ Sam Fitton, 'My Owd Case Clock', printed by Sam Fitton, with illustration. Held at Oldham Local Studies and Archives, D-FIT6/2. Full text and illustration digitised at 'Minor Victorian

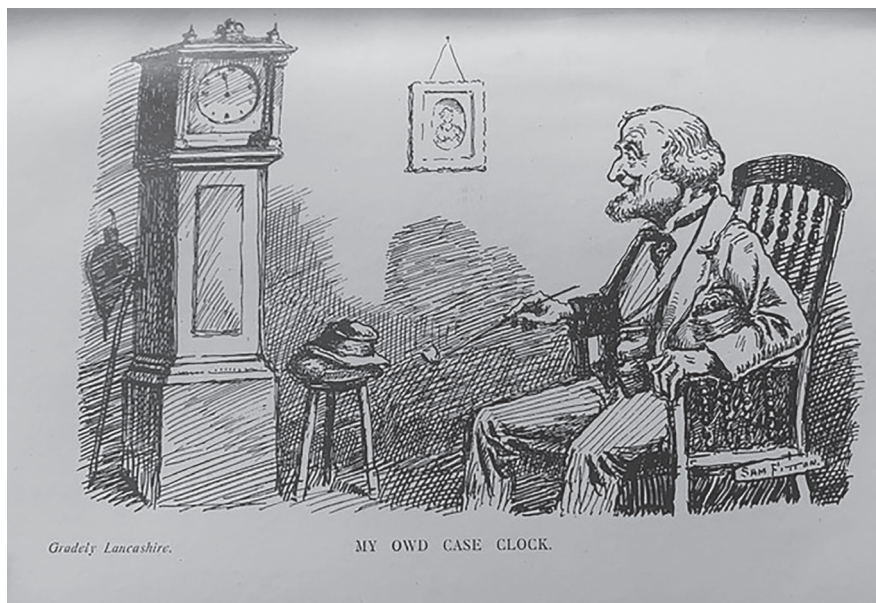


Figure 5.1. Sam Fitton, 'My Owd Case Clock', *Gradely Lancashire* (Stalybridge: George Whittaker & Sons, 1930), 64.

Fitton's accompanying illustration (Figure 5.1) shows an elderly man in a domestic setting, labelled as 'Sam Fitton', with his chair turned towards the clock and smiling at it, as though in conversation. Fitton was a child factory worker, and remained in a cotton factory while he developed a side career as writer, performer and cartoonist. His poem is representative because it emphasises this threat of losing the loved object in times of economic hardship:

I axed th' owd clock: 'What mun I do?'
 I welly think tha'll ha' to goo;
 I'm loth to part wi' thee, owd lad,
 But th' childer starve, an times are bad.
 Say shall I sell thee, too, owd friend,
 Or does ta think 'at times ull mend?

Fitton's conversational style indicates that this was also an oral piece, meant for recitation. In a happy ending, the decision is made to keep the clock and the hard

Writers': <https://minorvictorianwriters.org.uk/Lancashire%20Miscellany/c_Fitton_1.htm> (consulted 17 May 2024). Poems also republished in Sam Fitton, *Gradely Lancashire* (Stalybridge: George Whittaker, 1929).

times pass. Yet this sense that every domestic object can and might be pawned, sold, and lost, as working-class families move between rented properties and workplaces, and in and out of steady employment, is the essential underpinning of the affection portrayed in these poems. Doolittle notes that clocks

underpinned the rhythms of family life by marking cyclical patterns of hours and weeks through their sounds and the rituals of winding and cleaning. They also acted as constant reminders of longer periods of time, of generations and generations to come in the future. But clocks could stop, just as family continuity could not be taken for granted in the insecurities of everyday life and death.¹⁶

As she observes, the link between the elderly male householder and a clock was solidified by the huge popularity of American songwriter Henry Clay Work's 'My Grandfather's Clock', from 1870, which helped to popularise the term 'grandfather clock'. Poems like Fitton's take their cue from the song, yet revise it by writing from the perspective of the grandfather, not the grandson, and by expressing more affection for the clock itself.

Loving a piece of furniture is risky. These material objects will wear out, grow obsolete, and eventually become junk; they are also always unstable possessions, which can pass at any time to a new owner. While Cook's poem does not make this explicit, it is implicit in her defiant determination not to part with the armchair. Fitton does make it explicit – the clock partakes in the risks of domestic life in a worker's household, including the constant risk of loss. And its risk of breaking down, of becoming worthless, is echoed in the worker's status, as he ages alongside it. While this argument could potentially be made about objects owned by people living in poverty in any historical period or location, there is a particular valence to these poems in Victorian Britain, because of their relationship to the rise of a new commodity culture and mass market in this period, drawing on new technologies for rapid international and imperial trade, and for the mass production of goods.¹⁷ As Peter Gurney has argued, consumption was seen as part of social advancement: he traces the rise of a 'liberal consumerism' in which 'rising demand for goods across all classes was regarded as the bedrock of moral as well as material progress'.¹⁸ Fitton's family losing their clock, in this light, would be less of a personal failure than a political one, since the acquisition and retention of consumer goods was an index to the health of wider society.

¹⁶ Doolittle, 260.

¹⁷ On this, see Richards, *passim*.

¹⁸ Peter Gurney, *Wanting and Having: Popular Politics and Liberal Consumerism in England, 1830–1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 17 and *passim*.

Ownership of domestic objects that were not essentials but luxuries – both an armchair and a clock fall into this category – certainly did become much more possible for working people as goods became cheaper and easier to purchase. At the same time, however, the working population, especially in urban centres, became more mobile, and hence more likely to live in temporary accommodation: home ownership was out of reach for most people. As Karl Marx observed in 1844, the poor man ‘finds himself in *someone else’s* house, in the house of a *stranger* who always watches him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent’.¹⁹

Larger items of furniture might just fall into the category of ‘portable property’, as recommended by Dickens’s Wemmick in *Great Expectations*, but were not necessarily easy to move. They are markers, in Cook and Fitton, of a hoped-for and hard-won solidity and permanence in domestic space, that reflect on the desire for children to thrive despite very high death-rates, for women to survive childbirth, parents to live comfortably into old age, and for the speaker to be able to look back on a past which involves continuity amid change. To write a love poem to these objects is a means to reflect on the dark realities of life for working people, in a format that was inoffensive and thus readily publishable in spaces mediated by editors and read by employers, particularly the periodical and newspaper press. Such poems may also, as shown in my examples later, be a way of *advertising* these objects, as goods that others might wish to possess. But this does not detract from the fact that these poems express love: love in a lesser sense than love for other living things, perhaps, but love nonetheless. To notice them as love poems, rather than simply poems that express mild affection, helps to reframe the literary relationship between people and things as intense, meaningful, and both emotionally and intellectually important: as Sherry Turkle puts it, in a collection of essays on ‘evocative objects’, ‘we think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with’.²⁰

This essay focuses on two particular objects, out of the many that are celebrated in this genre: clocks, especially the ‘wag at the wa’ pendulum clock, which predates the ‘grandfather’ clock (the case clock is a later development – early-mid Victorian clocks had this name because the weights and pendulum hung free

¹⁹ Karl Marx, ‘Human Requirements and Division of Labour Under the Rule of Private Property, in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, consulted at <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/needs.htm>> (accessed 31 May 2024). There is a useful reflection on this passage in Emily Cuming, “‘Home is home be it never so homely’: Reading Mid-Victorian Slum Interiors’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18:3 (2013), 368–86, 371.

²⁰ Sherry Turkle, ‘Introduction: The Things That Matter’, in *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, ed. Sherry Turkle (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007), 3–10, 5.

below the clock face, ‘wagging’), and the sewing machine. Both objects are useful yet not vital possessions. Timekeeping could be done by means of the growing visibility of public clocks, as well as the increasingly old-fashioned norm of being woken up by a ‘caller’ to get to work on time in the morning, usual in industrial towns and districts. Sewing could be done by hand. Owning these items indicated a small measure of prosperity, though they both became increasingly widespread in domestic homes as the century progressed. And they are both artefacts that represent new mechanised ways of performing an old task – keeping time, mending or making garments – and that were produced, increasingly, in larger workshops or factories, shipped and sold at scale, rather than being hand-made and locally produced. Moreover, there is a particular rationale in choosing two pieces of machinery like this as subjects of poems, because rhythmic motion and regular mechanical sounds are essential to their operation. While it is unusual for popular verse *not* to be metrically regular and follow a set rhythm, this does enable poets to connect the soothing rhythms of the poem with the soothing rhythmic presence of the object described.

‘Wag at the wa’ clocks are especially fascinating because there is quite a substantive subgenre of poems featuring poets discussing their affection for this particular style of clock, preceding Work’s song as well as succeeding it. Unsurprisingly, since this nickname for a pendulum clock is most used in Scotland, the majority are from the Scottish newspaper press. I have located five ‘wag at the wa’ poems first published or reprinted in newspaper poetry columns between the 1860s and the 1890s, which generally indicates, given what is missing from newspaper archives or difficult to locate by key-word searches, that many more poems remain to be found. Several of these poems were additionally reprinted across multiple newspapers, as was common practice with newspaper poems thought to have wide appeal, so they would have reached a very large audience. Pendulum clocks may have been so common in poems about beloved objects because they were widely perceived as a standard item in the mid-Victorian workers’ home, one likely to be familiar to (and owned by) readers of the popular press. Several newspaper accounts mention this. In the *Forfar Herald* of 1888, a piece in which the author revisits the small Scottish weaving town he left twenty years ago describes how the wives of handloom weavers ‘did their very best’ to keep a one-room dwelling, which also housed the loom and spinning wheel, neat and pleasant:

The plate rack on the wall, being high, had the best chance of preserving a tidy appearance. Over the chimney piece, or at the side of it, hung the clock, known as the ‘wag-at-the-wa’ because its pendulum was not concealed in a case.

The other furniture consisted of built-in beds, ‘a dresser, two tables ... and some chairs and stools’.²¹ The clock, then, is the only item that is mentioned in the description which is as much decorative as functional. Although this article represents it as an item commonly found two decades previously, in the 1860s, an 1887 *People’s Journal* piece on ‘How the Poor Live’ includes one of these clocks in a description of a ‘but and ben’ day labourer’s house (one room, partitioned roughly into two), where a family of seven lived:

A little decoration has been attempted for the purpose of brightening up the dismal shanty. The rough deals of the partition have been covered with pieces of wall paper, ‘presentation’ portraits are suspended with pins on the opposite wall, and a few maimed crockery ornaments adorn the mantelpiece, which has been placed almost close to the roof. An old ‘wag at the wa”, hung beside the fireplace, grinds out the time, but, judging from where the ‘hands’ were pointing while I was in the house, the inmates would have been better without the clock if they had appointments to keep.²²

As the clock does not work correctly, it is there not to be useful but, as with the ornaments, to indicate an aspiration towards a better way of life. The ‘grinding’ of the clock echoes the daily grind of living in this level of poverty. Wag at the wa’ clocks were, by the 1880s, perceived as slightly old-fashioned. The unsigned 1873 newspaper poem ‘Auld Granny’s Wag at the Wa” emphasises that this is an ‘auld fashioned’ possession in its title and opening lines, which stress that the actual value of the clock is small, but that the author values it because out of her few possessions, his grandmother left him this clock, and an admonition to use his time wisely.²³ Despite it being a slightly out of place possession in a modern 1870s household, the poem concludes, his family will never be ‘ashamed’ of displaying it.

Every ‘wag at the wa” poem is written from the perspective either of a working man or woman who inherited the clock from an older relative, or an older man or woman who bought it in their youth. This enables each poem to enact the same narrative as Cook’s ‘The Old Arm Chair’, or Work’s ‘My Grandfather’s Clock’, in which the speaker recalls how the clock accompanied them or a family member through key life moments. Yet these poems have a much stronger focus on survival, as in Fitton’s poem, where the survival and continued functioning of this possession indicates that the family inhabiting the same domestic space as the clock has made it through hard times. In Jessie Morton’s ‘My Wag at the

²¹ ‘A Weaving Town Revisited’, *Forfar Herald* (20 January 1888), 6.

²² A Special Inquirer, ‘How the Poor Live: II. The Day Labourer’, *People’s Journal* (10 December 1887), 4.

²³ ‘Auld Granny’s Wag-at-the-Wa”, *Southern Reporter* (27 February 1873).

Wa’’, published in her collection in 1866, she stresses that the speaker’s continued possession of a clock bought in her youth was hard won, when widowhood left her without resources:

Then dark grew the warl’ that ance was sae fair,
 My pouch sune grew licht an’ my hoosie grew bare;
 I grat owre my bairnies sae helpless an’ sma’
 An’ thocht I wad pairt wi’ my Wag-at-the-wa’.

In old age, her children grown up, the ‘cantie wee’ clock keeps her company, and they ‘crack’ (chat) together about the old days.²⁴ As in all these poems, the clock has developed a personality, and a mutual relationship with its owner. Agnes Marchbank’s ‘Oor Wag-at-the-wa’ similarly represents the clock as the only remaining friend of an elderly speaker. The poem is written from the perspective of a working man. The clock was his mother’s, and moved with him into the ‘butt an’ a ben’ that he shared with his new wife and family. It watches over years of loss:

Then cam’ darker days fu’ o’ trouble and pain,
 And it ticked softer music like some sad refrain,
 An’ the hoose was as quiet as quiet could be –
 For the bairns were a’ laid ‘neath the ‘aul elm tree:
 An’ Jen she gaed neist, the last o’ them a’,
 And left me nae freen but my wag-at-the-wa.’²⁵

In reminding the speaker of those he loved, even if they are now lost, the clock brings religious consolation and companionship; it is affectionately addressed as ‘my aul’ wag-at-the-wa’’. As in a number of such poems, the constant ticking of the clock is like the ticking of a heartbeat, the underlying beat of a human life. The anapaestic rhythm of two unstressed beats followed by a stressed beat, in both poems, mimics the tick of the clock. Marchbank was a regular contributor to Scotland’s most popular magazine, the *People’s Friend*, and wrote a number of now forgotten novels; while Morton was the widow of an ironmonger who later worked as a stationer and bookseller.²⁶ The poems demonstrate their mastery of an already established sentimental subgenre.

²⁴ Mrs James [Jessie] Morton, from *Clarkson Gray and Other Poems* (Edinburgh: W. P. Nimmo, 1867), 51.

²⁵ Agnes Marchbank, ‘Oor Wag-at-the-Wa’’, *Wishaw Press and Advertiser* (18 February 1893).

²⁶ For more on Marchbank’s career, see Charlotte Lauder, *The People’s Friend? Recovering Scottish Popular Magazine Culture*. PhD thesis, University of Strathclyde, 2023.

There is another historical context to this collection of poems, however. As readers would have known, this kind of clock – often made in Germany, and also sometimes known as a Black Forest clock – was ‘industriously hawked from door to door’ from around mid-century onwards by sometimes aggressive salesmen, deliberately targeting the working-class domestic market.²⁷ Henry Mayhew briefly discusses the ‘tallymen’ who sell clocks, ‘principally Germans who can speak English’ in *London Labour and the London Poor*.²⁸ In 1862, an editorial in the *North Briton* discusses a common scam, in which door to door clock sellers deliberately target poor households who are likely to refuse to buy the ‘wag-at-the-wa’, as the 26 shilling cost of a clock was high on a standard weekly wage. On receiving a refusal, however, the clock seller ‘seeks permission simply to hang up the clock beside you for a few days, as he has no convenient place where it can be accommodated’. But the seller then never returns, and the householder is instead issued with a summons for an unpaid debt to the value of the clock, risking losing both it and all his goods to pay for it. The salesman then buys the clock back at cost price, to repeat the scam.²⁹ In 1863, the same newspaper again used its editorial to rail against German clock hawkers, arguing that they were operating illegally, that their means of selling was suspect, especially in targeting women, and that they were selling clocks at hire purchase for thirty shillings which were promptly ending up in the pawnshop, where they were worth only three:

The entire clock is imported at a tenth of the price for which it is sold, a little trouble sticks it together and then it is stuck on the wall of some home, which in a few weeks is desolated and sold at the Cross, clock and all, to pay these illegal traffickers their gross imposition.³⁰

Pawnshops were ‘overstocked’ with brand new clocks, the editorial asserts, some of which might have been pawned by the woman of the house without the male breadwinner even realising that she had committed to the purchase.

Wag at the wa’ clocks, then, were likely widely associated in mid-century with predatory practices of sale and loan. These editorials do not suggest that they are exposing this trade, but that everyone knows about it and yet it remains scandalously unregulated. This recasts the sentimental poems about such clocks in a new light, not because it undermines the strength of affection and family ties felt for

²⁷ A Native, ‘Reminiscences of Kilrenny’, *East of Fife Record* (26 August 1898), 6.

²⁸ Henry Mayhew, ‘Of the Tally Packman’, *London Labour and the London Poor* (Charles Griffin: London, 1865), 1:382.

²⁹ ‘Poor Men’s Debts’, *The North Briton* (21 June 1862).

³⁰ ‘The German Clock Hawkers’, *The North Briton* (25 April 1863).

these objects, but because it emphasises that commodities that were linked to fraud and the darker practices of the marketplace, and that were perceived by at least some contemporary sources as cheap, over-valued, mass-produced artefacts, nonetheless were loved. The fact that these clocks were commonplace and unexceptional, and yet are highly valued through the perception of a working-class speaker, reinforces the connection between the common object and the common people. Love for an object is not reliant on rarity or commercial value; it inheres in the presence the object has accrued by virtue of enduring throughout time and space.

This is true for many poems celebrating possessions, including workplace objects (tools, machines) such as the wheelbarrow that Northumberland miner-poet Matthew Tate celebrates in ‘Ti me awd barrow’ (more beloved because Tate himself constructed it), or even miner James Brown’s worn-out pit coat in ‘My Auld Wark-Coat’.³¹ In both cases, as in some of the clock poems, ‘auld’ is used in an affectionate Northern/Scots sense, as part of an informal address, while also signifying the fear that something is becoming worn out and can no longer be used. The second subgenre of poems I will discuss, sewing machine poetry, is interesting because it falls mid-way between such poems about working or workplace objects, poems about domestic objects, and advertising poetry. Sewing machines started to become available for the domestic market in the 1860s, with large-scale factories open in Manchester and Glasgow by the 1870s. The first poems celebrating them appear from around this period. Several are paens to industrial progress and technology and serve to advertise the new machines to a wide audience through publication in the newspaper press. Reverend Fergus Ferguson’s ‘The Sewing Machine’, for instance, composed for recitation at an event hosted by the Howe Machine Company, of Glasgow, was reprinted in the ‘Poets’ Corner’ of the *Hawick Express* in 1873. He suggested that sewing machines were so popular with young women that courtship was now accompanying the sewing:

Young bachelors now do not care for pianos,
Nor whether fair voices be deep or sopranos;
There is hardly a week, through the day or at e’en,
But the question is popped at a sewing machine.³²

This is partly because ownership of a sewing machine and dexterity in using it, Ferguson suggests, are the hallmarks of a good investment in a wife, who will

³¹ Matthew Tate, ‘Ti me awd barrow’, *Songs, Poems, and Ballads* (Blyth: Alder and Co., 1898), 58–9. James Brown, ‘My Auld Wark-Coat’, *Songs and Poems* (Glasgow: John McCallum, 1932), 33–4.

³² ‘The Sewing Machine’, *Hawick Express* (20 April 1872).

run the domestic space efficiently. But the machine also saves on domestic labour, causing ‘many a house, where the tear’s in the een’ to ‘give eloquent thanks, to the sewing machine’.

In similar mode, Glasgow engineer poet and journalist, Alexander Murdoch, who worked for Singer’s factory during his career, wrote two poems praising sewing machines, likely for recitation at company events. One, ‘The Shoooin’ Machine, A Rale Fack’. is a Scots poem purportedly written by a working-class man who has been persuaded to buy his wife not just one of these amazing new machines, but specifically a Singer model. Murdoch added, in a note to the second poem, ‘The “Singer” Sewing Machine’:

The Sewing Machine, in its invention and extraordinary development, has proved as important a discovery to the domestic world, as the Engine and the Steamship have become on the highways of commerce.³³

His collection also contains a positive quote from a review of his poems in the *Sewing Machine Journal*. As I have noted elsewhere, such poems operate in an ambiguous space, as ‘puff’ advertising poetry, or product placement, and as genuine celebrations of a transformative new technology that would make the lives of working people – women, in particular – much easier.³⁴ In this case, while Murdoch’s admiration of sewing machines may be entirely genuine, the ability to write convincing poetry about the commodities manufactured by his company would undoubtedly have furthered his career, by pleasing his employers. Indeed, such poems are an important part of Singer’s global marketing strategy, which, as Paula De La Cruz-Fernández has argued, involved ‘catering the sewing machine to a gendered middle-class perception of female labor in the home’ and ‘portraying this labor as art’, thus becoming a ‘protector of domesticity’.³⁵

The marketing strategies that visibly underly such poems would lead Victorian readers, accustomed to advertising verse, to suspect how ‘authentic’ the emotional relationship between working-class woman and sewing machine might be. Local firms like John Hargraves and Son of Carlisle commissioned sewing machine poems, again written in a working-class woman’s voice and emphasising the

³³ Alexander G. Murdoch, ‘The Shoooin’ Machine’ and ‘The “Singer” Sewing Machine’ (with footnote), *Rhymes and Lyrics* (Kilmarnock: James McKie, 1879), 71, 92. *Sewing Machine Journal* quotation, 104.

³⁴ Blair, ‘Advertising Poetry, the Working-Class Poet and the Victorian Newspaper Press’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 23:1 (2018), 103–18.

³⁵ Paula A. De La Cruz-Fernández, ‘Marketing the Hearth: Ornamental Embroidery and the Building of the Multinational Singer Sewing Machine Company’, *Enterprise and Society*, 15:3 (2014), 442–71, 444.

leisure time she gained from this purchase ('Now I have time to breathe / The breath of the flowers sweet'), as part of their campaign: 'I've a sewing machine of my own / At HARGRAVE'S depot bought'.³⁶ Yet other sewing machine poems do appear to represent the machine as a beloved object. Elizabeth Dickenson, an unknown poet whose collection, published in Leeds in 1871, states she is an invalid in 'humble life', wrote a poem 'On Parting With My Sewing Machine', which uses the language associated with romantic loss or mourning ('My bosom now with pain is swelling, / The cup of grief is flowing o'er') because she has had to sell, or perhaps pawn, a much-loved household 'treasure':

Thou art gone my household treasure,
I shall miss thy cheering sound
I have listen'd to – with pleasure –
As thy wheel went swiftly round.

How I labour'd to obtain thee!
Yes! I worked both night and day,
For I knew, when once I'd gain'd thee,
Thou my labour wouldst repay.

Now, by sickness overtaken,
I am forced with thee to part;
As if, by a friend – forsaken –
I regret thee from my heart.³⁷

Dickenson's regret is not simply framed as loss of past and future earnings, but as an emotional loss, of an object that brought her pleasure and company. 'I now can write no more', she closes, a standard ending that signifies that the writer is too overcome with grief to continue.

Similarly, 'Mrs Binnie's Sewing Machine', by Mary Bowskill Hair, wife of a schoolmaster in Airdrie, North Lanarkshire, and partner in a local printing firm before her marriage, seems like a genuine celebration of the sewing machine. The headnote to this poem, by editor James Knox, says that the poem 'recalls the time when the sewing machine was first introduced into Airdrie' and that Mrs Binnie was a dressmaker in the High Street. It is of course not impossible that Mrs Binnie commissioned this poem from Hair, since it related to improvements to a local business. Equally, it is possible that Hair and Binnie were friends or acquaintances. The poem, again addressed to the machine, states:

³⁶ 'A Song Over a Shirt', *Carlisle Patriot* (17 November 1860), 7.

³⁷ Elizabeth Dickenson, *Poems* (Leeds: Fred. R. Spark, 1871), 85. I have been unable to locate this poet in census records.

Whirr awa', my wee machine,
 There's music in thy foot and tension;
 A boon thou'lt prove to sewing folk,
 My wee machine, the newest invention!

[...]

Thou art a perfect wee conceit,
 I'm never weary working wi' thee;
 When winter nights are long and dull,
 Thou'lt keep me aye baith blithe and cheery.³⁸

'I like thee weel, my wee machine', Mrs Binnie, as speaker of the poem, observes, and 'With thee I'll work it fine and easy'. 'Wee machine' emphasises the contrast between the domestic scale of the sewing machine and the more suspect, less respectable large-scale sewing and weaving that happened in the Lanarkshire factories. But it also signifies affection: like 'auld', 'wee' in Scots is more than a straightforward reference to something as old or small, it is often used for children, or animals, with implications of fondness.

Once a sewing machine or a clock has been purchased, it either rapidly or slowly accrues the status of a treasured possession. Like all mechanical objects, obsolescence is built into these particular artefacts. John Plotz has argued that repeated Victorian assertions of attachment to objects may conceal an anxiety about the status of objects in this modernising age:

In Victorian sentimental object narratives, we often find the passionate insistence that in such objects must lie depth of personality, coupled with the worry (or perhaps even the latent conviction) that just the opposite is the case: that such objects are no better than cold material, and that the human energies wasted upon them signify the real coldness that lies beneath the seeming warmth of affective relations.³⁹

Poetry, however, is perhaps less inclined to represent the 'coldness' in these relationships, and more inclined to suggest their fragility, and the intrusive presence of future loss. Although objects were mass produced, heavily marketed using the latest techniques, and far from rare as household possessions, such poems do attempt to give each clock and machine an individual value and stress the emotional impact that ownership has on the owner. By framing the relationship

³⁸ Mary Bowskill Hair, 'Mrs Binnie's Sewing Machine', reprinted in *Airdrie Bards, Past and Present*, ed. James Knox (Airdrie: Baird & Hamilton, 1930), 288.

³⁹ John Plotz, 'Discreet Jewels: Victorian Diamond Narratives and the Problem of Sentimental Value' in *Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects and It-Narratives in 18thc England*, ed. Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007), 329–54, 336.

as one of love (not simply the more qualified ‘sentiment’), the affective power of household goods, and the pain felt at their loss or destruction, is brought into play. These poems use forms of language and framing to discuss things, which are exactly the same as those used in the love poetry and elegiac poetry published in the same columns and collections. The language and tropes, and the emphasis on writing ‘from the heart’, frame these poems as love poems for an audience very familiar with the popular love poem. Moreover, poetry itself, as a highly respected genre, helps to endue these common items with powerful resonance, suggesting they are worthy of being enshrined in literature. To love an object is indeed a risky investment, these poems argue, yet it is not ridiculous, because the pleasure and satisfaction gained from a relationship with a beloved item – satisfaction that may be linked to both usefulness and aesthetic value – is rewarding, particularly when the object in question successfully lasts for a long time. Since these poems value women’s domestic labour and men’s involvement in the domestic space, they are certainly part of the ongoing effort to render the working classes respectable and politically safe. Produced by working-class writers themselves, however, they represent respectability and a secure domestic space, containing attractive and useful household goods, as a desirable and attainable goal that is nonetheless constantly under threat by external forces. Economic downturns, precarious employment, sickness and an old age without state support, all haunt these poems, and the poems are designed as an indirect means to create readerly sympathy for helplessness in the face of the loss of beloved things. In a small way, then, practicing love for ‘perfect’ objects, and enshrining it in poetry, helps to advocate for an amelioration of social conditions.

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