

“BUT THE BIZARRE THINGS WON”

**QUEER MATERIALITIES AND DESCRIPTIONS IN
DENTON WELCH'S *IN YOUTH IS PLEASURE***

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| Työn nimi "But the Bizarre Things Won": Queer Materialities and Descriptions in Denton Welch's <i>In Youth is Pleasure</i> | |
| Oppiaine Kirjallisuus | Työn laji Maisterintutkielma |
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| Tiivistelmä <p>Maisterintutkielma keskittyy materiaalisten objektien sekä ihmisten ja esineiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen kuvaukseen brittiläisen kirjailijan Denton Welchin romaanissa <i>In Youth is Pleasure</i> (1945). Welchin romaani on täynnä yksityiskohtaisia kuvauksia materiaalisesta ympäristöstä – erityisesti ihmisen tekemistä esineistä, joiden kanssa päähenkilö Orvil Pym on tiiviissä vuorovaikutuksessa. Teoksen keskeisimpiä elementtejä ovat Orvilin ja materiaalisten esineiden välinen konventioita horjuttava vuorovaikutus sekä esinekuvausten runsaus. Ihmisten ja esineiden suhteiden moniselitteisten ja ambivalenttien ulottuvuuksien analyysi kytkeytyykin tutkielmassa kuvauksellisten kehysten ja hierarkioiden tarkasteluun.</p> <p>Tutkimusaihetta lähestytään kysymällä 1) miten ihmisten ja esineiden vuorovaikutusta kuvataan Denton Welchin <i>In Youth is Pleasure</i> -teoksessa ja 2) miten queer-näkökulma voi tukea Welchin romaanin materiaalisuuksien ja niiden kuvausten analyysia. Tutkimusmenetelminä käytetään queer-luentaa ja kuvauksen analyysia, jotka on johdettu tutkimuksen teoreettisista lähtökohdista (deskriptioteoria, queer-narratologia ja esineteoria). Analyysi osoittaa, että Orvilin kohtaamiset materiaalisen esineiden kanssa eivät sovellu yhteen perinteisen instrumentaalisuuden kanssa, jota horjutetaan romaanissa sekä tarinan että diskurssin tasoilla. Samalla esiin nousevat toimijuuden, esineellistämisen, omistamisen sekä visuaalisuuden potentiaalit ja problematiikka. Teoksessa ilmenevät ihmisten ja esineiden välisen vuorovaikutuksen ristiriitaisuus ja epävarmuus queerittavat sekä kuvausta että kerrontaa avaten kuvauksen analyysin queer-narratologisia mahdollisuuksia.</p> | |
| Asiasanat kuvaus, deskriptio, esine, objekti, materiaalisuus, queer-tutkimus, description, thing, object, materiality, thing theory, queer narratology, queer theory, Denton Welch, <i>In Youth is Pleasure</i> | |
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Abstract

This master's thesis focuses on the description of material objects and human-thing interactions in the novel *In Youth is Pleasure* (1945) by the British author Denton Welch. Welch's novel is full of detailed portrayals of the material world – especially its human-made objects – which the protagonist Orvil Pym interacts with and immerses himself in. The unconventional aspects of this interaction, along with the abundance of things and their descriptions, inspire a reading that charts the descriptive schemes and patterns manifested in the novel, and yet embraces the ambiguity that characterises its human-thing relations.

The topic of the study is approached by asking 1) how the interaction between humans and inanimate things is described in Denton Welch's *In Youth is Pleasure*, and 2) how a queer perspective can contribute to the analysis of materialities and their descriptions in Welch's novel. The methods, queer reading and analysis of description, are derived from the theoretical perspectives employed: theory of description, queer narrative theory, and thing theory. The analysis shows that Orvil's experimentation with material things goes against the logics of instrumentality both on the levels of story and discourse, revealing the complex potentials and problematics of thingification, agency, possession, and visibility. The ambivalence of the human-thing interaction in the novel participates in the queering of both description and narration, coinciding with the suggestion that there may be queer potential in the analysis of description.

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Topic of study, research questions, method

In my master's thesis, I study the role of material objects in the novel *In Youth is Pleasure* (1945) by the British author Denton Welch. Welch's modernist novel is built around detailed and vivid descriptions that draw attention to the material world as it is represented in the narrative. However, these materialities do not exist as isolated descriptions; they are described in relation to the protagonist Orvil Pym's thoughts and actions, becoming a central element of the narrative as Orvil explores the material world around him. The novel's focus on human-made, yet nonhuman material things and their relations to a human character emphasises the unique entanglement of non-human and human agencies, as well as subject-object positions linked to them. Looking at human-thing relations and their descriptions from a queer perspective, I am especially interested in examining the unconventional and nonnormative aspects of the relationship between Orvil and material things.

Material objects and their descriptions often play important roles in narratives. They attract the attention of characters, narrators, and readers alike, and sometimes even take over the story that is being told, resulting in a rich abundance of detail and a variety of interpretations. (E.g., Oulanne 2021.) Material things in literature are often studied from anthropocentric perspectives as mere objects of human action, reducing the material world to nothing more than a backdrop to human activity. Description, perhaps partly for similar reasons, has not received much attention in literary theory; it has often been overlooked in favour of other narrative elements that are seen more important in terms of plot and events (see Hamon 1981, 7). While interest in the material realities portrayed in literature has risen in the 21st century, the poetics and logics of describing material objects have not been studied in detail. Thus, my thesis contributes to the discussion on the roles material things assume in narratives and, at the same time, draws attention to literary description as a means of representing the material world.

Our lives circle around things that we consume, use, and value aesthetically or personally. In an age where we largely depend on material objects and developing technologies, yet our relationship to the world we inhabit is compromised in a way that threatens our own livelihood, it is important to look at the ways in which literature builds material worlds and imagines interaction between humans and things. Material objects deserve to be treated “as agents in their own right, changing the course of the narratives” (Oulanne 2021, 1). My study is aligned with ecocritical, post-humanist, and new materialist ideas of nonhuman agency in the sense that it considers inanimate objects agential and having a profound impact on human life, as well as in the sense that human and nonhuman materialities cannot be fully separated from each other.

In my bachelor’s thesis (Pitkänen 2021), I conducted an ecocritical analysis of the nonhuman and human subjectivities in the poem “Ogre” by the imagist poet F. S. Flint. While material objects were a part of the study, I focused mainly on the entanglement of human and nonhuman agencies manifested in the lyrical ‘I’ of the poem. The ideas of nonhuman agency and shifting subject-object positions being central to my master’s thesis as well, I now focus more specifically on human-thing relations and approach them within the analytical and theoretical frameworks of description, thing theory, and queer narrative theory. My research questions are:

1. How is the interaction between humans and inanimate things described in Denton Welch’s *In Youth is Pleasure*?
2. How can a queer perspective contribute to the analysis of materialities and their descriptions in Welch’s novel?

The arrangement of my research question supports the idea at the core of my project: interaction itself has a descriptive dimension. In other words, it is impossible to distinguish the represented interactions between characters and nonhuman things from the poetics and logics of description. To study literary representations of materialities, I draw perspective from thing theory, formulated by Bill Brown (2003) in *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, and steered into a new materialist direction by Laura Oulanne (2021) in *Materiality in Modernist Short Fiction: Lived Things*. In terms of literary description, I use Philippe Hamon’s (1981) *Introduction à l’analyse du descriptif* as a basis for my approach, reading it with a few other theorisations of description – Kai Mikkonen’s (2005) study on the relationship between image and text and Auli Viikari’s (1993) ideas on the problematics and potentials related to literary description. Searching for the strange and unconventional both on the levels of narration and the protagonist’s interactions with material objects, I turn to queer narrative theory (e.g., Lanser 2021). With these theoretical tools and inspirations, I

examine how material things are portrayed in *In Youth is Pleasure*, and how they are seen and experienced by its protagonist.

The methods I employ in this study are analysis of description and queer reading. The analysis of description is conducted by examining selected parts of *In Youth is Pleasure*; a thorough reading on the novel enables the selection of scenes and passages that are most significant in terms of the topic of my study. Focusing on the description of material things, I shed light on the specific ways in which objects interact with the human agency embedded in the narrative. A queer reading of description brings out the unconventional, uneasy, and strange aspects that may characterise the interactions between Orvil and inanimate objects. As a verb, 'to queer' also means 'to inquire' (see Lanser 2021, 12–13), fitting here as my goal is to make a queer inquiry into the object world of Welch's novel. Together, these methods offer perspectives and means to look at the ways in which objects are portrayed in fiction, making possible a re-evaluation of description in terms of both content and form. In practice, I am reading *In Youth is Pleasure* with the theories I have chosen to employ in this study – the relationship between theory and literature is mutually informative and in dialogue with my own analytical observations on the selected examples of human–thing interaction in the novel.

In the remainder of the introduction, I introduce Welch and his works to the reader and give a short account on some of the grounds for the study of materialities in modernist fiction. The theoretical tools and perspectives of my study are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I begin the project of queering the human–thing relations of Welch's novel, a theme continued in Chapter 4 with a focus on the dynamics of power and possession that are manifested in the descriptions of real and unreal materialities, concluding my analysis with an examination on the logics and patterns of description in Welch's novel.

1.2 Denton Welch & *In Youth is Pleasure*

Welch's plots were uneventful, and the only character he knew in depth was himself. But no one ever wrote more beautifully about chipped tea saucers (Crain 1999).

[I]n his view, artefacts, on whatever scale, enliven the natural world. As a sign of human presence in the landscape, buildings, like statuary art, bring meaning to the natural world. But human action can also destroy what meaning it creates. (Stockard 2017, 34.)

Maurice Denton Welch (1915–1948) was an English writer and painter. In addition to *In Youth is Pleasure*, published in 1945, Welch completed two novels, *Maiden Voyage* (1943), and *A Voice Through a Cloud* (1950), as well as several short stories, published in the collections *Brave and Cruel and Other Stories* (1948) and *A Last Sheaf* (1951). Welch

also wrote poetry, which has been published in the previously mentioned collection and an anthology called *Dumb Instrument* (1976). Whereas Welch's writing was praised in modernist circles, it did not receive much attention among the wider public (Clarke 2020, 2022). By studying *In Youth is Pleasure*, I aim to draw attention to a relatively unknown author's work that has not received the attention it deserves, and hopefully inspire further research on Welch and his literary production.

In general, it seems that Welch's life has been of more interest to scholars and literary enthusiasts than his fiction. As Welch's novels are highly autobiographical (Schmidt 2014, 442; Stockard 2017, 21; Clarke 2020, 2023), they have mostly been studied from the perspectives of autofiction and biography. This aspect cannot be omitted in the study of *In Youth is Pleasure* either; Welch (2021 [= IYIP], viii) originally subtitled it as "A Fragment of Life Story with Changed Names." In the latest academic article on Welch, Matthew Clarke (2020) asks how *In Youth is Pleasure* breaks the conventions of coming-of-age stories and the narratives of growing into a homosexual identity. Drawing also from Welch's own life with disability¹ and being gay in the first half of the 20th century, as well as the critical responses to his work, Clarke interprets *In Youth is Pleasure* as a story of queer failure to mature by heteronormative standards. Jo Croft (2006) examines the novel from the perspectives of adolescent identity and domestic space, interpreting Orvil's ambivalent tendencies to confine himself to small spaces. Welch's prose has also been discussed, for example, from the perspectives of images and dreams (Girard 2001) and war and memory (Stewart 2009).

In Youth is Pleasure tells the story of the 15-year-old Orvil Pym, who spends a summer at a hotel in the English countryside with his father, Mr Pym, and two older brothers, Charles and Ben. Sensitive and eccentric, Orvil feels alienated from his peers and loathes his life at a public school where he is bullied by other boys. A summer spent at the hotel and its surroundings – gardens, riverbanks, fields, and villages – gives Orvil a chance to explore his intuitions and desires, which are strongly connected to the material things he encounters on these adventures. Often trying to escape the attention of other human beings, he seeks fulfilment in objects that have the power to both liberate and torment him – in these interactions, nonhuman and human agency are enmeshed, creating strange dynamics of possession. Orvil often cherishes things that are deemed worthless by others, such as an old razor he takes from his aunt's attic. While Orvil obviously takes pleasure in shaving as well as the secrecy that the stolen razor is treated with, it also causes feelings of uncertainty and regret, as he worries about "making the hairs grow stronger and thicker by constant shaving" (IYIP, 12). The passage not only shows Orvil's self-consciousness related to the pubertal

¹ In 1935, when he was 20 years old, Welch was hit by a car while riding a bicycle. Due to a spinal fracture, he was paralysed from the chest down. Although Welch regained the ability to walk for a time, the accident led to disabilities and recurring spells of illness that lasted for the rest of his life. (E.g., Clarke 2020, 2022.)

changes in his body, but also how a material object becomes a tool for controlling these very changes, yet leading to an unpredictable result that troubles the instrumentality of the thing and its status as an object defined by human subjectivity.

The impact of material culture on Welch's writings has been noted in at least two instances (Crain 1999 & Stockard 2017). In a short piece in *New York Times*, Caleb Crain (1999) writes about Welch/Orvil as the "champion of preciousness" who is obsessed with material things and their strange, perverse, and grotesque potential, manifested especially in food and broken objects. To Crain, this aspect of Welch's writing seems to make up for what his novels lack – namely, eventfulness and depth. Emily Stockard (2017, 22), on the other hand, focuses on the significant role that artefacts and architectures take in Welch's journals: Welch explores in a nuanced and profound way the human desires of creating, repairing, and destroying objects, as well as the ways in which human life and material culture are interwoven. While tending to material things was a source of comfort to Welch, or even a way to extend himself beyond his own body, he also saw human trauma embedded in material culture, such as the trauma of war taking the shape of a destroyed building. Welch had sympathy for broken and mistreated objects that, according to Stockard, shared his own "semi-invalid" condition. In Welch's journals, the bond between humans, inanimate artefacts, and nonhuman nature is strong, as human-made things have a special role in blending with and making meaning of human life and loss. (Ibid. 21; 24; 27–30.)

Stockard's article offers an insight into the importance of material things to Welch, motivating a closer examination of how materialities manifest themselves in his prose. In *In Youth is Pleasure*, Orvil easily gets attached to things and places, such as the cottage orné near the hotel: "Orvil was so entranced with it, and with the whole dingle, that it gave him acute pain to think that it would never be his to keep and cherish. It would always be open to the loiterers from the hotel; and at any moment its indifferent owners might destroy it." (IYIP, 28.) Protective of the cottage, Orvil fears for its destruction and evaluates the motives of other people based on the strong connection he feels to the place, as if he were the only one who could take care of it and possess it in an ethical way. Orvil's desire to extend himself to nonhuman materialities is also linked to sexuality and death, which are both present in the church scene where Orvil kisses a Gothic brass on a tomb: "Suddenly, without knowing why, he lay down at full length on the cold slab and put his lips to the brass lady's face. [--] He laid his cheek against the brass and tried to think through the stone, through the coffin, to the skeleton..." (67.) These examples, all discussed in more detail in the analytical chapters of my thesis, showcase the multifaceted impact material, inanimate things have on Orvil; while necessarily being objects of description, they become something more than objects of Orvil's actions and thus, central to the narrative itself.

1.3 The material world in modernist literature

The questions of presentation and representation of real and imaginary things have always been present in literature. Since the industrial revolution, portrayals of the material world have been motivated by various societal, philosophical, and aesthetic meanings (Oulanne 2015, 44). Realist and naturalist literature often turned to detailed portrayals of the material world (Brown 2003, 15), which led the novel into more descriptive and spatial directions, as naturalists such as Émile Zola tried to attain a scientifically pure gaze through precise use of language and attention to detail (Mikkonen 2005, 237). In the decadent and symbolist trends of fin de siècle literature, realist conventions were challenged and objects given mythical and supernatural elements, like the aging portrait in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oulanne 2015, 44). While sharing some of these attitudes towards objects, modernism had its own, complex relationship with the material world. Welch's fiction is not only modernist because of the time it was written, but also because it deals with questions related to form, perception of reality, and visuality in a way that has even been called "ultra-modern". The surrealist quality of some of Welch's textual imagery can be compared to the visual surrealism of Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. (Girard 2001.)

Ever since industrialisation, it has been said that we are living in an "Age of Things" (Brown 2003, 5; Oulanne 2015, 44). During the development of mass production and consumer culture, people's lives became centred around material things, and our relationship with the material world changed profoundly. This transformation is especially evident in the art and literature of the first half of 20th century. Not only were works of art given the status of things, but modernism also found new ways of granting subjectivity to objects, as well as fetishising them. Based on the concept of authenticity, modernists established hierarchies between purchasable, short-lived commodities and unique art objects displayed in museums. This kind of fetishism is connected a desire to isolate and save the individual, admired object from the mass of replaceable and disposable commodities. (Oulanne 2021, 10; Brown 2003, 3; 7–8.) A similar tendency of isolating and fetishising things can be detected in *In Youth is Pleasure* as well, as Orvil is mostly fascinated by things that differ in some way from mass-produced commodities – things that could variably belong to museums, antique shops, or rubbish bins. Indeed, modernism's occupation with the material cannot be reduced to capitalism and consumerism, however prominent their impact is: it is also linked to ideas of possession that go far beyond the concept of ownership (Brown 2003, 5–6; 13), as we come to see in the ways possession is manifested in Welch's novel.

Modernist literature often focuses on the material objects of everyday life, selecting and emphasising certain individual things that become central to the narrative. In Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, a madeleine awakens the memories of

the narrator, and in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the soap bought by Leopold Bloom is granted agency and space in the narrative. (Oulanne 2015, 40; 43–44.) Modernist poetry also emphasises everyday objects and gives them emotive agency. The imagists, for example, called for a “[d]irect treatment of the ‘thing’” (Flint 1913, 199), as if to invoke its presence and agency in the text. Another way to look at modernism’s fascination with objects is through the changes in the notion of the human body caused by medical and technological advances. Modernism can be seen “as a pivotal turning point in the history of the body”, as the 19th century idea of the body as a unified machine was replaced by an idea of the body as a fragmentary, disassembled mechanism that blurs the boundaries between subject and object, internal and external. (Hall & Watts 2019, 13–14.) Despite its so-called inward turn into the human psyche, modernist literature also managed to envision a mutually constitutive and experiential relationship between humans and the material world (Oulanne 2021, 11–12).

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Thing theory

[T]hey can be so close that we may not always experience them as things, but rather as extensions of our lived bodies; we attach certain meanings and categories to natural and artificial things (Oulanne 2021, 3).

[O]bjects are independent of words and we must see them and perhaps touch them to understand them (Pearce 1992, 23).

Material things have become more and more central in the study of literature over the past twenty years. This shift is partly due to new materialist thought, which explores human and nonhuman materialities and the distributions of agency, challenging the dichotomy between objects and subjects and emphasising that despite being culturally mediated, material things also have their own agency beyond the cultural. (Oulanne 2021, 4-5.) The terminology concerning the material world is certainly human-made and cultural, and not without problems. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge and break down the meanings attributed to the terms “thing” and “object” that I use to signify the material in this study. Both very common words, they could be defined as “material items usually conceived of as inanimate that can be used or interacted with by human beings” (ibid. 3). The terms also contain more abstract meanings that can refer to immaterial things. While the word “object” may seem slightly more precise, it constructs the opposite of subject and thus manifests hierarchies with far-reaching traditions in Western thought, as well as grammatical rules.

Unlike Brown (2003), Oulanne (2021, 3) takes a stand against using the word “object”, for it contains the assumption of nonhuman materialities as nothing more than objects of human agency and subjectivity. Separating the concepts of object and thing has a history that reaches to Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, which

questions the subject-object divide from the perspectives of being, knowing, and doing. In Heidegger's thought, the thingness of a thing is not defined by it being an object (see Johnson 2008, 210). Put another way, "things exist and occupy space" regardless of what is done with them and how they are signified (Oulanne 2021, 3-4). Along with "thing", I have chosen to employ the term "object" in my study to both showcase the power structures it contains and to break them down.

In museum theory, material objects have been categorised as *artefacts*, "superorganic" material things that have cultural meanings and functions, or as *naturalia*, organic and inorganic natural beings. Artefacts can also be separated from *mentefacts*, which refer to different forms of abstract data. (van Mensch 1998.) Museological perspectives on natural, artificial, material, and immaterial objects can be adapted into the study of literature, and objects have the ability to "make the text museum-like" (Henderson 2010, 12). Museum theorist Susan Pearce (1992, 211) articulates an important starting point for my study, stating that while humans have a role in their creation, artefacts assume their own identities that are subject to change. In other words, the functions and purposes of objects are not static, as the relationships between subjects and objects change constantly.

Brown (2003, 1) writes, "apprehending the *mereness* of things can become a difficult task", as we are incapable of thinking things as they are, in their opacity and superficiality. Our ideas of things may prevent us from gaining new knowledge about them, as emphasis is put on cognition rather than sensation (ibid. 2). Instead of things, we see the possibilities and functions related to them and fail to notice their materiality, activity, and effect on human life (Oulanne 2015, 39; 2021, 5). Whether we use the word "thing" or "object" in literary analysis, the materialities referred to are always objects of the act of signifying. However, it is still useful to read things *as* things and examine how they are represented and made significant in texts. (See Oulanne 2015, 39-40.) Despite being textual constructs and representations that cannot fully be traced back to their 'real-life' referents, material things contribute to literature in many ways and, striving towards the physical, they can even contest the dominance of language. Thus, we can ask how things become "recognizable, representable and exchangeable", how and to what purposes they are used in texts. (Brown 2003, 3-4.) I seek answers to these questions by aligning my approach with the one proposed by Oulanne (2015, 40), who suggests that material things and their representations be read with a focus on what is happening between things and humans, examining the space things are given in the narrative and asking how they constitute a thingness that cannot be reduced to functionality or cultural symbolics.

Oulanne (2021, 3; 7) reads material things with cognitive, anti-anthropocentric, and affective approaches, asking "how fictional works manage to convey a sense of the livedness of a body, world, or a thing". Things can be used to convey affective

shifts in the narrative, encouraging the reader to reflect on their own lived experiences and find real-life equivalents for the materialities represented in the text (ibid. 8–9; 12). Oulanne identifies modernist authors whose work not only contains an abundance of material things but also treats them as lived: Djuna Barnes's, Jean Rhys's, and Katherine Mansfield's short stories, for example, are filled with portrayals of curious material things and subjectivities embedded in them. While I share Oulanne's idea of things as lived, I approach the relationship between thing and character in Welch's novel with a different emphasis that draws from description and queer narrative theory.

Modernist literature has potential in terms of how we use and make meaning of objects, as the concepts of interiority and exteriority are problematised (Brown 2003, 9; 12). Indeed, life and meaning are not 'interior', but continuously formed in the relationships between humans and things (Oulanne 2021, 9). Books are material things filled with material things, and as Brown (2003, 11) suggests, the very act of reading blurs the line between outside and inside. Recent theory of mind has drawn attention to the ways in which the mind interacts with and expands into the world, inspired by enactivist ideas of the mind as embodied. Enactivism emphasises the connections between mind, body, and environment, suggesting that cognition is not limited to the functions of the human mind and that knowledge depends on senses and emotions as well as reason. Material things become a part of the subjective "I" as they are incorporated into the bodily experience, and thus, the workings of the mind are largely based on and extended into the material. (Haanila, Salminen & Telakivi 2017, 35–37.) These ideas fit well into the analysis of things in fiction, and Oulanne (2021, 6–7) also links them to the concept of lived things.

Human-thing coexistence is built on complex and diverse relations, which Brown (2003, 13) aims to characterise with an "intermediate ontology where things seem slightly human and humans seem slightly thing-like." Furthermore, the identities of characters are built in connection to the objects they interact with, and the characters may become synonymous with these things, be they clothes, accessories, or furniture, as we come to see in my analysis of *In Youth is Pleasure*. Sensation and emotion exist and evolve between human and nonhuman materiality, continuously blurring the line between humans and things, as well as subject-object hierarchies linked to them. (Oulanne 2015, 39–41; 2021, 5–6.) According to Oulanne (2015, 39), we are forced to recognise the materiality or thingness of objects when they cease to function in their usual tasks and are, for example, broken or dirty – thus, materiality lies in surprising encounters between humans and things. This is an important aspect in my analysis of *In Youth is Pleasure*, as Orvil is intrigued by useless, broken, and abandoned things, often interacting with objects against their intended purposes. This shifts the reader's attention to the materiality of the thing and raises the question of norms and taboos linked to specific material things and their spatial contexts. The idea of encountering

the thingness of objects when they are broken or tarnished comes from Heidegger's notion of *Vorhandenheit*, 'presence-at-hand'. When an object is present-at-hand, it exists *an sich*, in itself, not only as an instrument for human action (Heidegger 2000, 99). In this case, the object can be seen as gaining subjectivity, as its existence is merely referred to (see Pöggeler 1998, 161). When broken, an instrument transforms into a thing present-at-hand. In the act of fixing broken objects, humans encounter things in their materiality, in themselves, not only through their instrumental use. (Heidegger 2000, 102–103.) Instead of focusing on the idea of presence-at-hand or the act of repair, I look at the misuse and repurposing of things in Welch's novel from a queer perspective.

When the focus is on human–thing relations, it is important to recognise the exchange of features between things and humans. The descriptive poetics of *In Youth is Pleasure* is filled with this exchange, humans compared to inanimate objects or food, food compared to inanimate things, human body parts to food, things personified, and so on. In *Persons and Things*, Barbara Johnson (2008) reads texts which bring humans and objects closer together, contemplating the sharing of properties between persons and things. Johnson's theory contributes to my study especially in terms of objectification, desire, and sexuality, which are manifested in the human–thing interactions of Welch's novel in a complex way – desire and sex appeal are connected to the inorganic and the inanimate, as the human subject seeks to express desire 'there', in the place of the other, not 'here' (ibid. 147; 213). Johnson (ibid. 69–79; 114–117) reads romantic and sexual encounters with inanimate things through this lens, also drawing attention to the notions of femininity and masculinity manifested in human-made objects that share something with the human body as well as human personhood.

2.2 Theory of description

Soyez vif et pressé dans vos narrations;
Soyez riche et pompeux dans vos descriptions² (Boileau 1972, 74).

The relationship between description and narration has always been complex. In addition to the French scholar Philippe Hamon, description has been discussed for instance by Gerard Genette and Roland Barthes, yet it has not received as much attention in literary theory as other elements of narrative (Viikari 1993, 60–61). Though Genette recognised the importance of description in his narrative theory, it was always considered in some way inferior to narration. For example, Genette argues that mimesis – imitating, showing, describing – cannot exist in literature without diegetic

² Engl. "Be sharp and urgent in your narrations;
Be rich and ornate in your descriptions" (translation mine).

narration. (Genette 1980, 163–164; Mikkonen 2005, 250.) Description has been nicknamed by Genette (1976, 6) “*ancilla narrationis*”, the maidservant of narration, a metaphor suggesting in rather a sexist way that description is secondary to narration (see also Viikari 1993, 60–61).

The theory of the descriptive system has been formulated by Hamon, who sees description as a dominating, integral part of a text and establishes description and narration as equal discourses that are always in some way contained in each other (see also Mikkonen 2005, 231; 253). Hamon (1981, 44) aligns description with poetry in the sense that its elements are difficult to replace or reproduce; the exactness of language is ideal in both poetry and description (see also Viikari 1993, 63). Due to its lack of definition and status, theorising description has its difficulties. Description cannot be localised to a fixed function or position in a discourse, and it does not belong to any particular literary genre. Its semantic logics can hardly be defined either, as it is difficult to discern how meaning is distributed in description and how it is made to mean something. (Hamon 1981, 6–7; 9–11.) Description can, however, be recognised as a discourse operating in texts alongside other discourses, such as dialogue (Mikkonen 2005, 228). The descriptive elements of a text function in many ways and on many levels: they build worlds and characters, move away from plot and events, and affect the reader’s interpretation of the narrative. Yet, description is often treated in the analysis of (literary) texts as a transitory point from which one moves forward to study “more important” things (Hamon 1981, 7).

One of Hamon’s central ideas is that description is based on pre-existing political, ideological, and economic concepts, as well as those of other branches outside of literature. Describing is never merely an act of describing a reality, but also a means to prove one’s rhetorical skills and knowledge of literary models. Description works in between texts and in the verifiable, not only to create a plausible appearance of reality in fiction. Thus, to describe is to describe *for* (“*décrire pour*”), as description is coded and finalised to achieve a concrete purpose that is something other than representing ‘the real’. In fact, Hamon wants to avoid a referential approach that treats description as synonymous to the spaces, things, and objects it describes. (Hamon 1981, 5–7; 12.) This is somewhat contrary to thing theory motivated by new materialisms, which insists, as explained in the previous section, that things represented in literature have a material connection to their real-world counterparts. My study is aligned with new materialist thing theory in the sense that without knowledge of the material world we inhabit, the signifier would not mean a thing; material and discursive agencies are woven together, and sense-making cannot be separated from sensing. However, Hamon does admit that the referent may have a role in the analysis of description and shows how material objects can work as descriptive *topoi*. From the perspective of thing theory, description can be seen as a literary device that directs attention to the

material and its abilities to function both spatially and temporality as narrative agents (see Oulanne 2015, 41).

The problematic theoretical status of description can be explained by its position in classical rhetoric. Throughout time, various ideas have been employed to characterise description: it has either been considered the total negation of literature, or a superlative, excessive device that needs careful controlling. Hamon identifies three threats that have been linked to description. First, description might introduce 'foreign' vocabularies into the text, which causes a problem of readability. Second, if it becomes an end instead of a means, description compromises the effectiveness of the demonstration and the overall unity of the work. Therefore, description should always remain auxiliary. Third, the ungovernable freedom of description can result in a difficulty of controlling the reader's responses. The reader is granted a power which resembles that of the author, and the act of reading is no longer governed or programmed. (Hamon 1981, 13; 15.) Therefore, description can be seen as factor that creates uncertainty on both semiotic and semantic levels; this very uncertainty, along with a tendency to escape definition, attracts queer narratological perspectives.

Hamon's descriptive system has been characterised as one of the most structuralist literary theories (see Mikkonen 2005, 245–246). It certainly is an attempt to construct a structured model for the analysis of a phenomenon that, according to Hamon (1981, 7) resists structuralist methods. Hamon's model has been criticised for being too generalising and limiting to be adapted into literary analysis, and for assuming hierarchies that do not necessarily exist in all descriptive texts. It has been pointed out that literary vocabularies are not purely based on lists or stocks of words, or any ready-made models, even though literary and historical conventions do have an impact on description. (Mikkonen 2005, 245.) While I do not adopt Hamon's system as such into my analysis of *In Youth is Pleasure*, I use his theory on the tropes, schemes, and frames of description, as well as the characterisations and justifications of different descriptive types. It is also noteworthy that Hamon's descriptive system applies to and is inspired by realist and naturalist texts; adapting it to other genres does not come without problems. Yet, being a largely descriptive novel, *In Youth is Pleasure* leans partly on realist conventions, which makes possible its examination from Hamonian perspectives. For example, the material frames of seeing – such as windows, mirrors, and keyholes – in Welch's novel make for an interesting object of study in terms of visual description.

The Finnish scholars Viikari (1993) and Mikkonen (2005) contribute to the theorisations of description and its relationship with narration. The visual plays a major part in Mikkonen's account of literary description, as literature often depicts what is

seen³, be it an actual image, for instance in the form of an artwork (ekphrasis), or a space, a material object, a human being. The visual is present in language through metaphors, figures, and tropes, and it can also manifest itself in the structure of the novel. While description cannot exist without a referent or an object, the relationship between language, visual representation, and the signified remains metaphorical; word and image are not directly translatable, or capable of presenting the referent as it is. (Mikkonen 2005, 225–226; 230–231.) Moreover, Mikkonen (ibid. 55–56, 226) counts spatiality, traditionally limited to visual arts, as a form of literary description. Spatial form in literature, theorised by Joseph Frank (1991) in the 1940s, can be seen to largely rely on description. As descriptive passages take up space in the narrative, they may interrupt the flow of events, or even contest the tendency to read narratives as temporal sequences. Yet, description is not innately uneventful; there is plenty happening in the descriptive passages of *In Youth is Pleasure*, as we will come to see.

Through an analysis of Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, also used by Frank as an example of spatiality in literature, Brian Glavey (2009, 750) comes to find that "modernism's experiments with spatiality are potentially a good deal queerer than has been recognised." Ekphrasis, or the literary description of a visual presentation, functions in *Nightwood* as an attempt to resist the passing of time and to identify with the visual in order to find stability, while also marking an alienation from the social world and its fixed identities. Thus, the spatial descriptiveness of a novel can be seen as a dead end, a queer refusal to reproduce narrative coherence and historical continuity. (Ibid. 753; 758–759.)

Literary conventions always control description and its relationship to events and narration. Viikari (1993, 64–65) notes that as the order of descriptive elements shifts from general to specific and central to peripheral, the hierarchy of values behind description can be revealed. Making these hierarchies visible or altering them, description also has the potential to disturb its own 'natural' orders and challenge conventions. Furthermore, description can be seen as textual amplification that produces excess, unlike the abstractive functions of plot and structural analysis. (Ibid. 74.) The details of description have the potential to challenge realistic illusions, and to create new realities; they can produce more specific and engaging meanings and connections than sheer referentiality, which strives for realism. Moreover, description and its chain of metaphors create symbolic systems that extend to the interpretation of the entire text, its structures open, metaphorical, and ambiguous. (Mikkonen 2005, 228; 237–239.) I see these shifting, parallel, and ambivalent functions of description as having potential in terms of queer narrative theory and a queer reading of *In Youth is Pleasure*.

³ Mikkonen (2005, 239) does acknowledge that not all description leans on the visual; description can, and often does, draw from other senses too.

2.3 Queer narrative theory

Narrative is not the antithesis of queerness, nor is it not mere window dressing to theory. Narrative is a condition of possibility for queerness. It is a form through which queers forge, experience, sustain, renew, and reimagine relationality. (Bradway 2021, 712.)

Queer narrative theory is present in my study both on the levels of story and discourse: while the ways in which Orvil interacts with the material can be examined through a queer lens, the textual descriptions of material things and their role in narratives can also be queered. Originally a slur, the word “queer” has been reclaimed by queer activists and theorists to celebrate the “vivacity, mobility, and color” of sexuality. (Schoene 2006, 285.) As queer activism and theory have developed in close connection to each other, the political functions of queer – nonconformity, civil disobedience, and defiance of heteronormative ideologies – play an integral part in queer theory, which is politically engaged to stand up for the plurality and openness of gender, sex, and sexuality, defying categorisation, essentialism, and fixed identities (e.g., *ibid.* 285–287).

While queer stands for active and emancipatory engagement with the social world, it has also come to mean, especially in queer theory, a complete rejection of identity (e.g., Glavey 2008, 750). These anti-categorical and anti-identitarian stances of queer theory have constituted an antithesis to narrative, the nature of which is usually considered normative and normalising (see Bradway 2021, 711–712). Tyler Bradway (2021), however, finds queer potential in narrative form, conceptualising it as a relational queer formalism in which different attachments, detachments, bonds, and belongings shape narrative and the forms it takes. Thus, queer narratologies open up possibilities to bring form and content closer together; there is meaning in form, too, and representation is as much about form as it is about content (Lanser 2015, 24–25; 36). The question of form is also relevant to thing theory, as objects can be made into both fragments and forms, bringing out their thingness by detaching them from their everyday use (Brown 2003, 9).

Ecocritical, posthumanist, and new materialist ideas have had a prominent impact on queer theory in the past decades, inspiring new approaches to the relationships between humans and nonhumans, nature and culture, mind and matter. Queer ecologies, as well as affect theory, have contributed to this project, pointing out that “while queer theory has been largely uninterested in environmental questions, it has always been interested in relationships, especially those that cross boundaries or break taboos” (Seymour 2018, 240). This is especially noteworthy in relation to the modernist idea of the body as fragmentary; whereas some modernists focused on the defects of the human body, seeing it as degenerate and deformed, others envisioned the body as fluid and constantly refiguring itself, not being able to fully adapt into any environment (Hall & Watts 2019, 18–19). The modernist notion of fluidity resonates with the

fluidity of sexuality and gender manifested in *queer*, suggesting an extension of the human body into the nonhuman, material world through constant attachments and detachments.

While seemingly neutral, the terminologies and hierarchies constructed by narrative theory have underlying connotations related to gender and sexuality. Challenging the binaries of narrative (theory) may help seeing beyond the binaries of sexuality and gender as well. (Roof 2015, 54.) Queer narrative theory stands against the essentialisations and dualisms of narratology, some of which stem from structuralism, and experiments with methods and methodologies that have potential in studying these notions critically (Warhol & Lanser 2015, 1; 9-10). The emphasis of narrative theory has traditionally been on plot and events, whereas other narrative elements, such as description and characters, have been overlooked. (Bradway 2021, 712-714.) Queer narratologies draw attention to these elements, as well as the unidentifiable aspects of narrative and the relationship between temporality and spatiality. (Young 2021, 4; 8). Susan Lanser (2021, 21) discusses the queer potential of narrative voice and the three ways in which it can be queered, identifying (1) the queer speaking subject, (2) the ambiguous, genderqueer narrator, and (3) a more general and expansive queering of narrative elements and figures of speech, such as metalepsis and free indirect discourse, or the very binaries constructed by narrative theory. These and other narrative transgressions do not necessarily need to have anything to do with gender or sexuality (ibid). I am especially interested in Lanser's third category in terms of analysing the descriptive elements of *In Youth is Pleasure*, examining how the queering of form participates in the queering of content.

As noted above, queer narrative theory can be seen as a project of rethinking structuralism and narratology, testing the limits of knowledge, as well as rethinking subjectivity through ideas linked to form, relationality and materiality. Furthermore, a queer perspective challenges the visual as a dominating mode of knowledge and a form of objectification and control, exploring the role of other senses in the interaction between forms. (Amin, Musser & Pérez 2017, 229; 232; 234.) This is an interesting point in terms of literary description and its effect on narrative form, as description often relies on visibility (see Mikkonen 2005, 226). In Chapter 4.3, I return to the complexity of the visual, contemplating its dangers and potentials manifested in Welch's novel.

3 *IN YOUTH IS PLEASURE AND THE DESCRIPTION OF MATERIALITIES*

This relation, hardly describable in the context of use or exchange, can be overwhelmingly aesthetic, deeply affective – it involves desire, pleasure, frustration, a kind of pain (Brown 2003, 29–30).

The interaction between the protagonist Orvil and the material world is one of the key elements of *In Youth is Pleasure*, made into a novel in the 1940s when the already established consumerist society had been shaken by two world wars. Thus, there is nothing simple about the ways in which Orvil and nonhuman materialities interact with each other. In this chapter, I attempt to characterise and interpret of the complex relations between Orvil and material objects, drawing from thing theory and queer (narratological) perspectives. From a look at the abundant thing world of Welch's novel along with its thing-human exchange of features and redistributions of value, I move onto the anti-instrumental and erotic elements in Orvil's interactions with inanimate materialities. The chapter is concluded with an analysis of how humans are rendered thing-like – in other words, thingified and objectified through description.

3.1 Bizarre things, peculiar descriptions

In the processes of modernisation, material objects not only became devices of individuation, but also autonomous things with lives of their own. This type of fetishism is present in modernist literature which often grants inanimate things a subjectivity of a kind and places them outside the logics of consumption, into the realm of individual meaning. (Brown 2003, 7–8; 33.) In *In Youth is Pleasure*, Orvil is often drawn to unusual objects that do not fit aesthetic conventions and are deemed worthless or useless by others – some of them cast aside and forgotten, others treasured as unique, eccentric

possessions. While visiting his schoolmate Guy in Hastings, Orvil observes the interiors of the house closely, intrigued by “an old child’s harp, broken but very pretty” (IYIP, 123). A tarnished, abandoned hatchment steals his attention when he is exploring a church by himself, making him momentarily forget the passage of time:

He looked up at two old mildewed hatchments nailed on the walls. They had evidently been discarded from the nave and left to rot up here. One was charming, with classical medallions and wreaths round the coat of arms. In admiring this, Orvil quite forgot the clock (IYIP, 71.)

In real life, too, Welch had an interest in broken and neglected objects (e.g., Crain 1999), or a kind of a sympathy, a sense of mutual care: “The damaged pieces he collected can be seen as analogous with the broken state of his body, as commentaries point out. But the journal entries that reveal Welch’s sense of being protected, cared for, even enlivened by certain features of his material surroundings, prepare us to see beyond this level of simple identification.” (Stockard 2017, 27.)

In the case of *In Youth is Pleasure*, it can also be said that inanimate materialities “enliven” Orvil, as well as the entire narrative. The novel comes to resemble a cabinet of curiosities, a *Wunderkammer* filled with encyclopaedic displays of objects collected by wealthy people. Like a cabinet of curiosities, the rich object world of Welch’s novel contains things that are, in themselves, peculiar to Orvil. One of these curiosities is the armadillo bag which Orvil finds in an antique shop:

On a low stool stood a work-bag made out of a baby armadillo. Gathered cherry satin now took the place of guts, entrails and organs; and needle-cases, glittering scissors, reels of coloured thread, lay neatly in their separate compartments. Only the back and head and paws and tail of the armadillo remained.

Orvil lifted the bag and felt along the reptile back. Strong black hairs sprouted between the scales. The eyes were heavy-lidded, shrivelled and blind; the tiny feet dried and curled into bird claws. He put it down and turned away, feeling sick. (IYIP, 54.)

The armadillo bag combines the dead body of an animal to inanimate materials, making it a hybrid between animate and inanimate, nonhuman and human; a living being that has literally been made into a thing. Unlike strange objects usually do, the armadillo bag disturbs Orvil; behind his reaction could be pity for the exotic baby animal, cruelly made into a curiosity. But if there is an ethical concern, the narrator does not make it known; it is the thing itself that Orvil is “alarmed” by. Despite the mentions of his distaste, Orvil touches the armadillo bag, feeling “along the reptile back”, as if he cannot help it. According to queer narratology, there is as much meaning in form as there is in content; a study of narrative form can reveal something that the story itself does not. Thus, form can be “the outing of content.” (Lanser 2015, 36–37.) Here, it is descriptive form that stirs interpretations. The armadillo bag is described in detail and in a neutral tone as Orvil watches and feels it with his hands. Curiosity is stronger than disgust; or perhaps Orvil is not disgusted at all, but intrigued, not shocked by

the thing itself but the fact that the armadillo bag fascinates him when it should not. In this way, the study of description as both form and content – its length, tone, and arrangement – can give away something that would not arise in a purely thematic reading.

The shell grotto near the hotel is, in a way, similar to the armadillo bag: the walls of the cave are covered with shells and fossils, parts of beings that were once alive. These parts have been crafted into a curiosity, a place that takes its name from them, again a combination of the animal/animate and the inanimate. Whereas the armadillo bag disturbs Orvil, the grotto he loves “for itself alone as something beautiful and strange” (IYIP, 106). Perhaps these emotions do not purely depend on the things themselves, but on the narrative and descriptive contexts to which they are attached: initially, Orvil is afraid of entering the grotto because of its gloomy surroundings, but he overcomes his fear and finds treasures on the inside. As for the antique shop, he enters it with delight, expecting to find objects that please him but ending up encountering something “alarming”. Consequently, the armadillo bag and the shell grotto can be seen as having agency in the narrative, as they challenge both Orvil’s and the reader’s expectations.

Fetishism is manifested in *In Youth is Pleasure* on more levels than one. Marxist ideas of the mysterious, magical elements related to objects are present in the narrative, as material things seem to hold a special power over Orvil, luring him to look at them and touch them, but not necessarily to consume them. From a Freudian perspective, the fetish object fills a lack or an absence, also a potential element in Orvil’s relations with materialities. Yet, these ideas do not take into account the power that objects have as material things that humans interact with in the world, the power that is irreducible to human agency. (Oulanne 2021, 23–24; 38.) The other things that catch Orvil’s attention in the antique shop are a scent-bottle and a broken saucer. The patterning on them appeals to him, and he is glad that the saucer is broken, because “otherwise it would have been too expensive for him” (IYIP, 53). The object does not lose its value due to its brokenness; instead, it is an advantage that not only allows Orvil to purchase and possess the object, but also to redefine its worth based on his own taste rather than its value on the market.

The modernist tendencies of fetishising material things by saving them “from the fate of the mass-produced object” and resisting utilitarianism and instrumentality (Brown 2003, 8) are visible in Welch’s novel, as Orvil wishes to protect and care for abandoned things and interacts with objects against their intended purposes. We can also look at fetishism on a more erotic level in terms of Orvil’s interactions with materialities, a fetish signifying a sexual desire satisfied by a body part or an inanimate object, for example a shoe. Indeed, there are descriptions in *In Youth is Pleasure* that hint at a shoe/foot fetishism:

In a dazed way, Orvil fetched the shoes and started to polish them. As he thrust his hand into one of them, he thought, 'It's always mysterious inside shoes; like a dark cave. No light ever reaches the end. You can only feel along the walls blindly.' He placed his fingers in the little hollows – like a string of graded pearls – made by the toes. He traced the curve where the ball of the foot fitted. Pressing his knuckles up, he touched the over-arching leather, which seemed cracked and yet humid. He thought that there was a whole atmosphere and little world inside the shoe.

Orvil polished away lustily until the shoes glistened like wet brown stones. (IYIP, 85–86.)

By granting things an interiority, one also grants them a kind of subjectivity – according to Brown (2003, 7–8), this idea is at the core of modernist fetishism. In the passage above, interiority gains a concrete meaning as Orvil feels the inside of the shoe. Touch substitutes vision, like feeling substitutes knowing, as the inside of the shoe is “mysterious”, “like a dark cave”; these descriptions play into both Marxist and Freudian ideas of fetishism. At the same time, the shoe comes alive in Orvil’s imagination, having its own “atmosphere” and a “little world inside the shoe”. These ideas are comparable to the animism that fuels fetishism and challenges Western thought, the belief that there is something hidden and animated within things (ibid. 117). Shoes, especially boots, can be seen as masculine, phallic symbols (Oulanne 2021, 44), yet here the shoe is described through its emptiness – the absence or the lack of the foot – which enables the shoe to have its own, hidden life independent of human agency. Thrusting his hand into the shoe, filling it, Orvil takes on a more active and dominant role than in another flirtation with the shoe fetish, “[y]ou bet I’ll lick your boots, sir!” (IYIP, 59), or when he is thinking about having “metal toe-caps” in his mouth (144).

I have spoken of strange and unique things here as if these qualities were inherently linked to the object. However, strangeness is in the eye of the beholder; or in this case, the narrator or character, as well as the reader, who define what is conventional or normal and what is not. Thus, it could be said that it is the interaction between the human element and nonhuman, inanimate materialities that creates an impression of queerness. In *In Youth is Pleasure*, there are several examples of how description crosses boundaries between human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate, effectively queering the things it describes as they are distanced from their categories of reference and creating peculiar, even disturbing associations that go beyond the dualist logics of zoomorphism, anthropomorphism, and personification. To Orvil, tombstones look “like teeth scattered on the ground after a fight” (IYIP, 71), the lettering on the package of a lipstick reminds him of “white worms wriggling in and out of angular lattice-work” (98), and the fragments of a fallen ceiling resemble “huge broken biscuits” (105). Especially the descriptions of food combine the animate and inanimate, as well as the nonhuman and human:

The mushrooms, with their flattened damaged gills radiating from a centre, looked like shrunken scalps of coarse Oriental hair. [--]

The pêche Melba arrived with its dripping veil of thick red Escoffier sauce. The two

slices had been joined together so that the buttock-like shape of the fruit was again apparent.

'It's like a celluloid cupid doll's behind,' said Orvil to himself.

'This cupid doll has burst open and is pouring out lovely snow and great big clots of blood.'

Orvil put some of the metallic-tasting red sauce on his tongue. (IYIP, 7-8.)

The little cakes lay helpless on their plates and seemed to call to him. He took in at a glance the square ones covered with jam, sprinkled with coconut and topped with glistening cherries; the round shortbread ones with portholes to show the bright lemon curd inside; the small tarts of criss-cross lattice-work; the phallic chocolate and coffee éclairs, oozing fat worms of cream; the squares of sponge, enclosed in four hard slabs of chocolate and dressed with wicked green beauty-spots of pistachio nut. (44.)

The act of eating becomes interesting when food is associated with human body parts, as happens in the descriptions of mushrooms and éclairs quoted above: a thing that has been made into an object of human appetite, is suddenly, strangely anthropomorphised. In the case of the mushrooms, the analogy toys not only with cannibalism, as they are compared to human scalps, but also with a racial stereotype, making the image violent in more than one sense⁴. The "phallic" éclairs, on the other hand, are quite obviously associated with male genitalia and semen – analogically, eating the éclairs becomes synonymous with oral sex. In addition to the éclairs, the "squares of sponge" also stand out from the list of cakes: like a human face, they have beauty-spots.

The anthropomorphism of the pêche Melba is slightly different; the dessert is compared to a doll, or more specifically "a celluloid cupid doll's behind" due to the shape of the peach that has been sliced in half. The androgynous doll in Orvil's mind is a miniature, inanimate thing whose body models that of a human, at least to a degree. But, in association with the dessert that combines the human and the nonhuman into a thing that is both, the doll becomes something that is neither thing nor human. It remains a thought, an image conjured up by Orvil's mind, but in his inner monologue it also becomes something present and describable, almost physical. Comparing the peach that has been split open to buttocks makes the image sexual, but so does the broken cupid doll that excretes snow and blood, giving different meanings to the ice cream and the Escoffier sauce. As Orvil eats, he digs into both the dessert in front of

⁴ Written in Britain in the first half of the 20th century, Welch's novels are not devoid of Eurocentric and racist language and imagery. For instance, when trying on a lipstick, Orvil tries to make his lips look "fat as nigger lips" (IYIP, 98). Moreover, there are instances in the novel where Orvil glorifies and fantasises about forced labour and physical punishment, picturing himself as a slave (57-58). These aspects of the novel become especially disturbing set against the histories of oppression and othering during which European colonialists and imperialists saw non-European, non-white peoples as little more than objects of economic, political, and cultural exploitation. Johnson (2008, 95) argues that the problem is not so much that a person is put to the role of an object, but indeed the unequal distribution of power. However, as my previous examples show, *In Youth is Pleasure* evokes racial otherness by objectifying individual body parts rather than personhood, recreating violent histories and using stereotypical, oppressive imagery to do so. Thus, the poetics of making things appear human or humans thing-like are not separate from real power relations that affect people's lives, no more than literature is separate from the rest of the world.

him and the image in his mind – the sauce even tastes metallic, like blood. The fantasy, thus, manifests itself in a physical thing.

Now, however strange we may deem associations like this, there are so many of them in the novel that they come to constitute the norm rather than the exception. Description, with its orders of spaces and objects, has the power to reveal norms and value hierarchies (Viikari 1993, 64); it can also rearrange them. The abundance of unconventional associations and unique things in *In Youth is Pleasure* not only participates in the aesthetic and economical revaluation of material objects, but also sets a tone for the entire narrative, creating new contexts and frameworks for the analysis of description. It is noteworthy that material things, no matter how they are depicted by Orvil/the narrator or imagined by the reader, have potential to disturb literary conventions and structures, and thus, make the narrative itself appear somewhat peculiar.

Often, Orvil's attention shifts from people to things, making human characters appear as a backdrop to Orvil's mental and physical interactions with material objects, such as in the scene where he focuses on arranging his brother Charles's clothes and accessories rather than listening to or answering his attempts at conversation (IYIP, 157). Oulanne (2021, 50) makes a similar observation on Djuna Barnes's stories which are "unique in their disregard for the human interest factor in the form of the psychology of characters, paired with the plentifulness of things that the characters seem to be gathered around instead of the things being there to support the formation and development of characters." Orvil being the main focaliser of *In Youth is Pleasure*, the abundance of material things can be read here as a psychological description of his mind. Yet, doing so would be to assume that Orvil himself is somehow above thingification, a question that I will return to further down the line.

Orvil's love for peculiar things does not exactly fit the norms of what are considered appropriate activities for 15-year-old boys, though it can be seen to reflect the modernist tendency to make waste into art, giving it new value (see Brown 2003, 78). Orvil has to defend his love for curious and broken things to his brother Ben:

'Have you been buying more junk?' Ben asked.

'Yes, a lovely little Chinese armorial saucer and a scent-bottle which I know nothing about, except that it has very pretty insects on it.' [--]

'Why do you buy all this broken muck for?' Ben asked in his most brutally matter-of-fact voice. He knew that this attitude would please and not irritate Orvil. 'What's the good of it? What can you do with it? It's a sort of disease – it's a mania.'

'Why do you like hitting balls, or oiling engines, or unscrewing nuts?' replied Orvil, copying Ben's manner as closely as possible. (IYIP, 59–60.)

Orvil is not discouraged when Ben calls his love for things an unhealthy obsession, even an illness. Nor does he seem offended by the word 'junk'; he even implicitly uses the term himself as he answers his brother's question and proceeds to describe the said junk as "lovely" and "very pretty". By doing this, Orvil reclaims a word that has been used in a negative, derogatory sense, constituting a "reverse discourse" like

theorists and activists did with the word *queer* (see e.g., Moffat 2015, 213). Excited, Orvil continues to question Ben's judgement by questioning the things he enjoys doing, trying to copy his brother's attitude and tone of voice to make them sound abnormal in the same way that Ben makes the act of buying "broken muck" sound. But Orvil is much more precise in his mentions of Ben's hobbies and arranges them, using a common rhetorical device, into a series of three, "hitting balls", "oiling engines", and "unscrewing nuts". Crain (1999) calls Orvil's response "a valiant attempt to make his estheticism sound no more decadent and arbitrary than an interest in sports and machinery." This is essentially what Orvil does, though there may be more to it: the terms he uses are also commonly used to refer to male genitalia. Ben's reaction to Orvil's remark is not described; perhaps Orvil gets his argument across, convincing his audience – be it his brother, or the implicit reader – that the pastimes considered appropriate for a young man are perhaps just as queer as collecting and cherishing curiosities that are deemed worthless.

Moreover, the conversation about 'junk' demonstrates how Orvil, throughout the narrative, reverses the dynamics between high and low, valuable and valueless, combining them in a way that echoes Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the carnivalesque. In the very beginning of *In Youth is Pleasure*, Orvil is eating creamed spinach, which looks to him like cowpat. While eating, he remembers once having stepped on a pile of cow's dung on a field:

He had looked down at his foot which had broken through the hardened outer crust. It lay in a trough lined with darkest richest green. 'What a wonderful colour!' he'd thought; 'It's just like velvet or jade, or creamed spinach.'

Now, as the waiter put the soft spoonfuls on his plate, the image was with him again. 'I'm eating cowpat, I'm eating cowpat!' he said to himself as he dug his fork in. (IYIP, 7.)

The image of cowpat does not leave Orvil alone, but it does not make him disgusted either, quite the opposite; he is rather excited, digging into the dish and pretending that it is actual cowpat. This type of scatological interest is also present when Orvil and his father meet Ben at a training camp, carrying toilet buckets: "The buckets seemed to hold for [Orvil] a rather alarming fascination. He wanted to poke a stick into their depths and stir about. He wanted to play with the floating lumps" (IYIP, 15).

In Bakhtin's (1984) analysis of François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, the carnivalesque spirit of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance boils down to turning things upside down, both on the levels of society and its power relations, as well as the human body. This is done in literature, or more specifically, through the modes of *grotesque realism*, by reversing high and low, front and back, upside and downside. In *In Youth is Pleasure*, the associative connection between cowpat and creamed spinach – excrement and food – can be considered carnivalesque in the sense that it is based on the same rhetoric of the upside-down movement, reversing the anal and the oral. While Orvil is not really eating the excrement he stepped on in the field, the creamed

spinach and the cowpat come to signify the same thing to him, crossing semantic distances. Interestingly, the food–excrement association is already present in the word “cowpat”, also known as cowpatty: patty means a small pasty or pie, and the American version of the term is “cow pie”. Excrement and food are not the only categories at play here; systems of value are also rearranged as the cowpat is compared to velvet and jade, luxurious materialities, and thus elevated analogically from waste to precious things.

3.2 Queer(ing) human–thing relationships

Throughout the narrative of *In Youth is Pleasure*, Orvil is strongly affected by the physical objects around him – things often become so central that they assume character-like features. Sometimes the nonhuman, material world seems to be the only thing Orvil is truly interacting with, and the things in that material world seem to have a more profound impact on him than he has on them. Thus, they can be read as agential, like the “old-fashioned cut-throat razor” which I have already mentioned in the introduction. The razor’s status as a tool that is used to achieve a purpose – hair removal – transforms into something more when Orvil finds it and steals it from his aunt’s attic. An object that might usually be briefly mentioned when describing, say, the morning routines of a man, is described in *In Youth is Pleasure* as having a kind of a secret relationship with Orvil:

He had taken the razor back to school last term and had used it twice, secretly. He had locked himself into the upstairs lavatory (the only one with a door), and then, standing on the seat, had dipped the razor into the tank, knocking it against the ballcock. He had shaved without a mirror, feeling very sensitively along his wet lip, with one finger, before he laid the razor on it... (IYIP, 12.)

Like an illicit affair, Orvil is afraid that his shaving is found out by the other boys at school who are always looking for reasons to ridicule and bully him. The routine is sometimes skipped because Orvil worries that the hairs will “grow stronger and thicker by constant shaving” (IYIP, 12). The secrecy of Orvil’s interaction with the razor reflects the adolescent desire for privacy, as Orvil locks the door of the lavatory and hides in the private space provided by it (see Croft 2006, 210). Indeed, the purpose of the razor is not really to remove unwanted hairs (he hardly needs to), but to spend time alone with the old razor and derive pleasure from the process of shaving itself. Rather than serving a purpose as a tool with which to control one’s looks, it takes control of Orvil’s actions and makes shaving the consummation of their relationship.

As Orvil and the razor become a *thing*, there is a third party involved. Along with the razor, Orvil has also found from his aunt’s attic a protective box worn by cricketers:

[In his room], he had strapped on the much too large box. The kid-leather, blackened and polished with sweat, felt like a hard human hand against his tender skin on the inside of his legs. He stood like this in front of the glass and started to shave his lip with the old razor.

Afterwards, he went downstairs, still with the box on underneath his clothes. As he talked to his aunt and his cousins, he had an inner glow of excitement and satisfaction. (IYIP, 12.)

The feel of the protective box on bare skin is described through an anthropomorphising figure, comparing the sensation to that of “a hard human hand”. If unaware of it, Orvil has his own purpose for the box that seems to differ from the purpose it is intended for, protecting one’s genitals while playing cricket. Instead, Orvil wears it for the purposes of experimentation, bringing together the materiality of his own body and the object, as well as the body of an imagined man who has worn it before him. Intended purposes are defied on another level, too: the comparison that links the inanimate object to a human hand works against the very logics of anthropomorphism. The hand is described as “hard”, which can be a quality of the human hand itself or suggest that the position or movement of the hand has something hard about it. But many inanimate objects are hard too, or have hands, like statues, dolls, and mannequins. What also makes the comparison rather curious is the characterisation of the hand as “human”, as if there were a need to specify that the hand belongs to a human, and not, for instance, to another primate, or an inanimate thing made to model a human being. This semantic-semiotic interplay of ontological categories can be linked to what Oulanne (2021, 71) calls “the simultaneous tendencies to anthropomorphize the nonhuman world and to dehumanize the human.” In fact, the analogy between the human hand and the cricket box brings the hand closer to an inanimate object, ending up objectifying the human body part rather than humanising the object.

Still, Orvil’s interest in the box depends on the human factor linked to it – the fact that it has been worn by another man, “blackened and polished with sweat”. Thus, the object comes to mediate human touch, allowing Orvil to simulate physical closeness with a man and to explore his own body and sexuality. The protective purpose of the box rubs off on him, making him feel “very safe” (IYIP, 12). Similar tendencies are linked to other material things as well, especially within the realm of clothing. Going for a swim in the river near the hotel, Orvil puts on rented bathing slippers, worn by others like the cricket box, and has a reaction comparable to an orgasm: “When he pulled up the slippers and felt the connecting string between his legs, he gulped and trembled and went rigid” (36). In quite a different setting – a church – he touches the cassocks to find traces of their wearers and longs to try on an “old-rust eaten helmet” hung over “an important Jacobean tomb” (68), not caring that his actions might be considered blasphemous. To Orvil, religious objects are just as material as the rest and can be interacted with as such; no ideas of sanctity or taboo hold him back when exploring a church. All the examples above show that it is the combination, even

hybridity of human and nonhuman presence that attracts Orvil in material things, along with the magical/fetishist touch where human and thing become inseparable through metonymy and synecdoche.

Returning once more to the razor and the cricket box, it is noteworthy that neither of them exists in the present of the narrative, but in the past reproduced by the narrator. However, the razor does meet the present as Orvil considers its impact on hair growth and thus, decides not to shave that morning. As the razor is never mentioned again, it is up to the reader to decide whether the shaving is forgotten, or whether Orvil continues to do it at intervals to be able enjoy the feeling of the razor “scraping” off “the slight golden down” (IYIP, 12) while minimising the possible undesired effects. Nevertheless, the reader ends up imagining continuity and futurity through objects – like the razor – or rather, through the absence of specific things that, in their spatial and temporal context, say, of three paragraphs, assumed an important narrative and descriptive role. But these potentials do not end at the last mention of an object. Brown (2003, 64) writes that “[o]ur habitual interactions with objects both bring them to life and impose order on that life; our habits both mark time and allow us to escape from time.” Habit constitutes the material world, as well as the self of the subject, while connecting inanimate and animate, organic and inorganic, turning objects “into personalities that must be subsequently managed”. Performing the same habits with the same things creates an illusion of stability and continuity, resisting disorder and change. (Ibid. 54–55; 63–64.)

Orvil seems to be caught up in objects and their stability in order to stay the same himself, yet his interactions with materialities are hardly ever repeated in the narrative. This lack of narrated/described routine makes the interactions seem unique, singular, enforcing the temporality of the object world as the descriptions of human–thing interactions assume an event-like quality. The re-objectification (or re-thingification) resulting from disrupted habits brings attention to the materiality of things, as well as to the physical connection between humans and things (see Brown 2003, 76). However, if there is no established routine in the first place, the misuse of objects cannot be seen as its disruption. Continuing throughout the narrative of *In Youth is Pleasure*, the anti-instrumental use of objects itself becomes a kind of a habit, though not necessarily focused on the same objects or even repeated behaviours.

One of Orvil’s treasured objects is a Chinese agate chicken given to him by his mother. It is brought up in two separate scenes in the novel: once in relation to Aphra Burdett (IYIP, 100) and again when the holiday is coming to an end, and Orvil needs to distract himself from the reality of going back to school. In the latter case, the agate chicken already feels vaguely familiar to the reader, now re-thematised through a kind of misuse or dislocation: “He popped it into his mouth and sucked it as if it had been a large sweet. It rang against his teeth, sounding like metal toe-caps on cold

pavements.” (144.) An obvious interpretation would be to see the agate chicken as a replacement for Orvil’s dead mother with whom the object is associated, acting as a dummy that fills the lack of the mother. However, there are other ways to look at the agate chicken: in the description above, it is compared to sweets and toe-caps. So, there are multiple analogies to be considered here: one associating the interaction with breastfeeding, another with eating, and yet another one hinting at the fetishisation of footwear. If the agate chicken reads as a dummy or a sweet, it can also be read as a gag. This brings to mind the billiard ball scene in Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, analysed by Brown (2003, 77), who deems the act of putting a billiard ball into one’s mouth a mark of “McTeague’s oral-sadistic stage of development” and “homoerotic aggression”. Whereas these elements may be present in *In Youth is Pleasure* too, the agate chicken is more of a source of comfort to Orvil than an object of aggression. It is as if the description of the agate chicken wants to move away from the psychoanalytical framework and into another kind of an object world. Instead of hegemonising one interpretive frame, we can let the different discourses and implications coexist and cocreate a queer heterogeneity of meaning on both descriptive and referential levels.

Studying Henry James’s *The Spoils of Poynton*, Brown (2003, 146) writes that things are “not so much objects as they are congealed actions, passionate acts of seeking, selecting and situating”. In the case of *In Youth is Pleasure*, things and their descriptions can also be seen as acts of exploration and experimentation. Wandering around the hotel and its surroundings, Orvil often seeks for physical contact with inanimate objects and ends up interacting with them in unconventional ways. As Croft (2006, 219) notes, “Orvil is impelled by an overwhelmingly ambivalent, narcissistic sensuality that, in turn, is shot through with fantasies of imprisonment and punitive physical restraint.” The scenes with the strap and the roller in the third chapter of the novel are a perhaps the two most distinct examples of this. These interactions are, if not much lengthier, more intensely narrated and described than shaving with the razor and wearing the cricket box. They also take place in the present of the novel and, despite their descriptiveness – or maybe because of it – they can be considered some of the main events in the story.

Finding himself alone in the ballroom wing of the hotel, Orvil tries to play the piano and strains his voice singing, feeling miserable and uninterested in the objects around him. Despite this fleeting lack of curiosity, he feels a need to uncover and examine the instruments in the ballroom. While doing so, one of the leather straps attached to the cover of the double-bass comes loose, and Orvil’s mood changes, “[a] strange idea had come to him, filling him with excitement” (IYIP, 57). He locks himself in the cloakroom and starts “scourging” himself with the strap, deriving pleasure from the self-inflicted pain and from being able to see his reflection in a mirror:

He saw his face jump and twist with pain. His bared teeth flashed back from the glass as he drew in a hissing breath. He hesitated, wondering if he could stand another lash; then he stopped breathing, bit hard, and struck again... [--]

At the sixth stroke he dropped the strap and danced about the room, half in pain, half in elation. [--]

He went up to the mirror again and turned his back to it. Looking over his shoulder, he delighted in the sore, hot lines on the white skin. They were a brilliant scarlet. He hoped that they would turn into deep purple-black bruises with bright yellow edges. (IYIP, 57.)

There are many interesting aspects in the strap scene in terms of queering description. Firstly, Orvil is discouraged by the conventional way to make use of the instruments (playing the piano while singing). The piano hardly lives up to the term 'instrument', as its instrumental use becomes unthinkable to Orvil – even more profoundly than with the razor and the box. Secondly, the characterisation of Orvil's lack of curiosity reveals that it is the narrator who wants Orvil to feel the instruments, perhaps to be able to indulge in detailed descriptions of them. But this descriptive potential is not fulfilled; the instruments are not made into objects of description that would also confirm their status as instruments played by human subjects. Instead, an alternative descriptive and narrative potential lies in the materialities that seem trivial and even more instrumental than the instruments themselves: the canvases and cases which are used to cover them, and the broken leather strap.

The strap is not the only object that Orvil connects with in the cloakroom – the mirror plays a significant part in his experimentations that take a sadomasochistic turn. Both the strap and the mirror place Orvil as the object of action, othering the self, though they also allow him to retain his subjective agency. Thus, Orvil becomes both the subject and the object of action, which in turn destabilises the positions of the material things in the passage. The mirror is especially interesting in terms of description, as it allows Orvil to become a thing, an object of description, not unlike an ekphrasis of a picture hung on a wall. Through the mirror and the act of watching oneself, identity symbolised by the human face becomes an object addressed – an object “without which there would be no subject” (Johnson 2008, 181). Rather than engaging in a psychological self-analysis enabled by the mirror (see Hamon 1981, 189), Orvil observes his own body with a voyeuristic, autoerotic gaze. From a Lacanian perspective, the scene can be read as a manifestation of the link between the narcissistic libido and the alienation of the “I”, a part of a child's mirror stage in which the visually recognised self turns into an object (Lacan 1980, 6).

After the scourging Orvil finds an old roller in the meadow near the hotel. He is immediately intrigued by it and continues the human–thing power play started at the cloakroom: “Almost automatically, Orvil knotted the extremely dirty and heavy chain round his waist, and then swayed from side to side, quite carried away by some new reverie” (IYIP, 58). The dynamics here are similar to the strap scene, though instead of Orvil observing himself in the mirror, Ben finds Orvil and sees him dragging the roller

and chanting made-up phrases. The word 'thing' is used by Ben to refer to something unseemly, as well as the chain that connects the roller to Orvil: "'You know, you'd be locked up if anyone else found you doing this sort of thing,' Ben blustered. He came forward and jerked the chain. 'For God's sake get that thing off before any other people come by.'" (IYIP, 59.) Orvil hardly seems affected by being told off, nor particularly embarrassed. However, his brother's words show the silent social agreements that define what kind of interaction between the human and the nonhuman is acceptable, these rules by no means distinguishable from the norms of gender and sexuality.

Another, if slightly different, example of erotic interaction with the inanimate is the brass lady scene. Its context resembles that of the strap and the roller scenes in the sense that Orvil, again, goes exploring and seeks out contact with the material. This time the exploring happens in a church which is full of objects that fascinate Orvil. The most distinct of them is the Gothic brass on the tomb of an unknown woman.

Suddenly, without knowing why, he lay down at full length on the cold slab and put his lips to the brass lady's face. He kissed her juicily. When he lifted his head, the smell and the taste of the brass still hung about his nose and mouth. He looked down from a few inches away and saw the wet imprint of his lips planted in the dulled, frosted area his breath had made.

'You haven't been kissed for five hundred years, I bet,' he droned in a low chanting voice.

He laid his cheek against the brass and tried to think through the stone, through the coffin, to the skeleton...

He was the woman now, lying in the grave, crying out for lovers, and watching from below his own antics on the tombstone.

'Perhaps she's got rings on', he thought. He wanted to despoil a skeleton; to one day take an ancient ring from a skeleton's finger. (IYIP, 67.)

Clarke's (2020, 2023–2024) interpretation that Welch's novels differ from traditional Bildungsromane and the conventions of queer coming-of-age narratives is interesting also in terms of thing–human relations. The narratives of the early gay Bildungsromane, such as E.M. Forster's *Maurice* and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, centre around coming to terms with one's own identity and facing the difficulties of expressing same-sex love during a time when homosexuality was classified as a crime or an illness. The plots of both Forster's and Hall's novels consist of elements like falling in love, first sexual experience, struggling to maintain a relationship that defies laws and societal norms, breaking up, finding stability.

In Youth is Pleasure not only lacks these elements but also profound, lasting relationships between Orvil and other people. Thus, it is fitting that Orvil's only kiss in the novel is with an inanimate object, the brass lady. And it is a proper kiss – Orvil smells and tastes the brass, intrigued by the imprint the "juicy" kiss has left on the lady's lips. His thoughts extend beyond – but do not override – the physical contact with the inanimate thing, to imaginations of the skeleton on the other side of the stone, inside the coffin. Despite the narrator naming it "romantic necrophiliac emotion"

(IYIP, 68), Orvil does not really imagine *being with* the dead woman, but *being her*, watching his own self from the grave. Like in the strap scene, Orvil wants to watch himself, again visualising himself as an object – now, this aspect is also linked to the desire to extend oneself beyond one's body to the remains of another human body that suddenly comes alive in Orvil's fantasy. Both the brass lady and the remains of the actual woman in the coffin break the boundaries of inanimate and animate, alive and dead – but which one is more of human and which one more thing, the skeleton or the brass lady?

Orvil's love scene with the brass lady can be linked to the literary discourses of loving an art-object that date back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where a sculptor named Pygmalion carves himself a woman out of ivory and falls in love with his creation. Love for a statue also came to symbolise the ideals of the Parnassian movement, and a common motif for the poet. In Charles Baudelaire's "Le Masque: Statue allégorique dans le gout de la Renaissance" a statue grieves for its eternal life, and in Théodore de Banville's "À Vénus de Milo" the lyrical subject dreams of being turned into stone from the love of a statue who in the poem turns human. (Johnson 2008, 114–117; 123.) Orvil's infatuation with the brass lady has Parnassian elements to it, as the intimacy with an art-object becomes a question of life and death and as he imagines himself as the dead woman. However, despite admiring an image of the woman, Orvil holds as ideal neither the object nor the presence of death embedded in it. Rather, he continues to focus on the immediate and the material – his imaginations even bring out the materiality of his own body. He wonders whether the skeleton wears jewellery and wishes to steal "an ancient ring" from a skeleton. The object that is meant to symbolise and idealise the woman gradually loses its distinctive status as the focus shifts on yet another thing that transcends time.

The skeleton of the woman, or what is left of her, is referred to by Orvil as a 'she', retaining personhood hundreds of years after death. Yet, one could ask if it is she or her skeleton in the coffin. The skeleton simultaneously *is* the woman and a thing that is *hers*. Thus, also the brass lady's status remains ambivalent; it is not specified whether Orvil addresses the woman who was once alive, her skeleton, or the object that symbolises her when he says "[y]ou haven't been kissed for five hundred years, I bet." To him, they are not distinguishable from each other, as much as the immediate physicality of the brass lady dominates the interaction. Fascinatingly, it is the very symbol or the image that is the most tangible thing here, and not its referent. It is the materiality of the symbol, not its abstract meaning, that enables interpretations of the scene. The symbol – the brass lady – is not just a substitute for 'the real thing', but a *real thing* in itself, something that Orvil can touch and kiss.

3.3 “An interesting relic” – thing-like persons

In one way or another, all characters of *In Youth is Pleasure* are at some point made thing-like. For instance, human body parts or features are often compared to food, reversing the tactics of analogies that transform food into human body parts. This reversal further complicates the analysis of description: we cannot really speak of either zoomorphism or thingification when human skin is compared to gelatine and meat (IYIP, 7; 129), human hair to isinglass (16), or human eyes to “boiled cod’s eyes” (10). A visual descriptive scheme can also be linked to these kinds of comparisons, as a window provides a frame that provokes a connection: “Orvil thought that the pink top half of [the Clifton boy’s] body framed in the window looked like a carefully illuminated prize ham in a delicatessen shop” (159). The substances or foods that comprise these analogies are all made of nonhuman animals, stripped of their status as creatures who have lives and made into things for humans to consume. Here, they are also exploited as descriptive devices that are, in fact, more human than they may seem. Yet there is still an otherness left in them, transferred by the analogy to humans themselves. Comparisons like these reimagine humans as objects of the same exploitation that nonhuman animals face, unsettling ideas of agency based on the subject-object divide.

The descriptions that thingify humans in the novel have multiple levels and motivations. Sometimes, the narrator of the novel simply seems to struggle with describing humans. The clichéd, stereotypical characterisations of a hotel maid as “a nice intelligent girl, very female” (IYIP, 13) and Charles’s friend Ted as “a gentle person, very masculine and dumb” (31) are about as detailed as the descriptions of supporting characters get. But sometimes a character that appears only once or a few times becomes interesting because of their likeness to a thing: for example, an old lady at a restaurant fascinates Orvil because she has “nutcracker lips” (7) and thus is described in more detail than some of the more important human characters in the novel. Adjectives relating to nonhuman materialities are actively used in descriptions of characters, and even Ted gets a little more space in the narrative when such words can be used: “It was a charming face, pale *oatmeal* colour, with glossy eyebrows; but the *bone-white* or *pencil-blue* lines wove a strange pattern on top of this *creaminess* (31; italics mine).

Sometimes the connections between humans and things have a metonymical aspect, as in the case of Orvil’s father, Mr Pym. “Mr Pym hardly meant more to him than black cars and exciting restaurant meals.” (IYIP, 5). Imagery of cars and restaurant meals is used to reveal something about Orvil’s relationship to his father. Or, put another way, the distance between him and his father is used to express Orvil’s disinterest in cars and restaurant meals. Despite this, Orvil does seem rather excited by some

of the meals he has in restaurants, as I have noted above. Nevertheless, his dislike of cars is reinforced by his dislike of Charles whose car is introduced to the reader before Charles himself, and Orvil equally detests them both (funnily, the name 'Charles' also rhymes with 'cars'). The Bugatti's "obscene exhaust-pipe" is compared to a "greedy vacuum-cleaner" (6) – an object that might pose a threat to some of Orvil's smallest treasures. In addition to expressing the distances and differences between him and his family members, describing humans through or as things also manifests class privilege as Orvil observes and dehumanises a waiter: "Orvil looked at him as at an interesting relic. He did not like to think of him as human." (19.) Despite refusing to perceive the waiter as a person who has subjectivity and emotions, Orvil finds him interesting as an "old-fashioned" thing, a remain from the past. This fascination, however, is more about Orvil's aestheticism and nostalgia and less about the fetishisation of labour, or the Marxist idea of conversion from person to object through capitalist production (see Brown 2003, 114).

People do sometimes intrigue Orvil as much as things – or rather, *as* things. Aphra Burdett, a friend of Charles's, is one of the few more central female characters in the novel, and at that, perhaps the most objectified one. For the duration of her stay, Aphra could be said to become Orvil's favourite thing. Considering the descriptions through which Aphra is made thing-like, the reader must ask: is their relationship based on the same premises as Orvil's meaningful relationships with the object world? Indeed, Orvil is as interested in Aphra as he is in the objects that she has brought with her to the hotel, which she happily shows him. Aphra's appearance – her face, body, clothes, and accessories – are described in equal detail as the things in her room. Like Orvil, Aphra also seems interested in little curiosities, and presents to him a part of her collection:

She opened a little case and showed Orvil some pretty things: a little diamonded badge of her husband's regiment, very respectable and genteel and upper middle class; some soft gold Hindoo nose-rings that had been made into rosettes for the ears; a sapphire star, once part of a great-aunt's parure. Orvil held the star in his hands.

'The whole set together was almost architectural,' said Aphra; 'it made the wearer look something like the Eiffel Tower done in Meccano. This star hung with a lot of others all round the neck in a sort of dog-collar. One day my aunt, who was ninety-one and very queer, opened her jewel-box, yanked this star off brutally, and dropped it in my cup of tea instead of a lump of sugar. She said that it was a particular sort of blue sugar which would do me a great deal of good. She was furious when I tried to return it at the end of the afternoon, so I've kept it ever since.' (IYIP, 93-94.)

Somehow, Aphra understands just what interests Orvil. She even shares a story about the sapphire star, telling how it ended up in her possession through her aunt using it against its intended purpose as "blue sugar". Unlike hardly anyone else, Aphra is kind to Orvil, and her kindness, charm, and beauty make Orvil immediately "quite devoted to her" (IYIP, 91). This devotion is hardly heterosexual or -romantic, but rather the kind of admiration that Orvil has for beautiful and strange things: "There was

something so strange and startling about Aphra's beautiful face, the sinister black trailing hat, and the music-hall voice and vulgar movements" (94-95). Like with material things, he feels at home in Aphra's presence, "content to sit next to her and take in every detail of her appearance and voice" (91).

Aphra is descriptively placed in the world of things by comparing her use of make-up to polishing furniture: "She seemed almost to use the powder as a burnish" (95). Later, as she is leaving the hotel, Aphra and her things become an inseparable entity: "Orvil went to her room. The mauve calf photograph case, the tortoise-shell boxes, the black glass scent-bottle, all had disappeared. He ran downstairs again, afraid that he might miss her altogether." (IYIP, 114.) Aphra's things not only come to signify Aphra's presence and absence; they *are* Aphra, and he fears that he will miss all parts of her. Perhaps to Orvil the things are even more Aphra than her person – they will one day outlive her. Reflecting on the temporariness of her beauty, Orvil compares her to objects that, unlike Aphra, stay the same:

Orvil just gazed blankly back, thinking that her beautiful appearance was a thing which must be eaten up with the eyes while it lasted. His ivory opium box and his agate chicken did not change, but every moment was helping to turn Aphra into something else. He dwelt on this thought; it horrified and fascinated him. (IYIP, 100-101.)

Johnson (2008, 59) writes that "the definition of 'person' would then be: the repeated experience of failing to become a thing." But failure to become a thing does not equal failure to thingify someone – or something. Aphra's appearance remains a 'thing' while also being subject to inevitable change; her looks are both a part of her, and something that can be separated from the rest of her. The remains of the brass lady in the coffin are *she*, and they are *hers*; so become Aphra's looks both a thing she *possesses* and a thing she *is*.

Orvil, who always knows how to touch inanimate things has a hard time touching Aphra, not knowing "how he was going to put his arm around her waist" (IYIP, 101) – perhaps she is still too much of a woman for Orvil. However, he has no difficulties 'eating up' Aphra's appearance over dinner. The idiomatic combination of the two senses further objectifies Aphra's looks as she becomes an edible thing, a part of the meal Orvil and the others are having, or like one of the cakes 'his eyes are eating up' in another scene (44). She also becomes an object of lust, as he craves for a taste of her thingness; while Orvil's desire does not obey the logics of heterosexuality, he is still affected by the dominant heteronormative and misogynist attitudes that are clearly manifested in the behaviour of most of the men in the novel, here especially in Charles's homosocial friend group, as well as Mr Pym. These parallel discourses work both to thingify and to objectify Aphra.

Femininity and women's sexuality are often associated with something missing (see Butler 1999, 35, 37; Johnson 2008, 73), be it subjectivity or a penis. Freudian,

phallogocentric ideas of female sexual development are present in a dialogue between Aphra and Charles's friend Dennis:

'Darling, your nose is almost too beautiful,' she sighed; 'someone ought to break it for you.'

This flattering personal remark so nonplussed and rattled Dennis that he became offensively rude in a very heavy way. [--]

'My dear, don't lose your wool,' she said, mimicking old-fashioned schoolboy slang; 'I only meant that I envied the organ like anything.'

'Well, don't envy my organs!' shrieked Dennis, who had now in his crazy rage lost all sense of the incongruous.

Everyone else laughed, but Dennis went on muttering: 'Bloody - damned rude - bitch - hag!' (IYIP, 96-97.)

Dennis's remark about Aphra 'envying his organs' reads as a reference to Freud's theory of penis envy, despite the topic seemingly being Dennis's nose. But it is Aphra who first uses the words, serving them right up to him to make the comment that changes the topic from his nose to other organs. Aphra becomes the object of Dennis's rage, because he cannot stand a woman praising his looks; in other words, his masculinity is threatened when Aphra calls his nose beautiful. Aphra seems to be aware of this too, as she jokingly suggests violence as an option to make his nose less beautiful, and as a result, Dennis more masculine. Strict models of femininity and masculinity are at play here, while Dennis both sexualises and infantilises Aphra through discourses that see female sexuality as lacking and women as mere objects of desire.

Seeing women as things, or things as feminine, are conventions deeply rooted in Western thought; Johnson (2008, 71-72) notes that women and vases have shared qualities in literary and aesthetic traditions, women appearing as 'mere containers' or 'vehicles' who carry something more important than themselves. To Heidegger, the emptiness that the jug contains makes it a thing - women, too, must be seen as empty to make them hold something. This analogy is made evident in *In Youth is Pleasure* when Aphra is leaving the hotel, and Dennis mocks the sentimental goodbyes: "He jumped on to a nearby pedestal, and clung to the urn as if it were some fat woman. He put his arms right round it lovingly and made ecstatic faces." (IYIP, 114.) By making love to the urn, anthropomorphised as "some fat woman", Dennis again objectifies and sexualises Aphra. In addition to the ornamental urn referred to here, the word "urn" connotes cremation; this potential allusion to a funeral urn interestingly juxtaposes with the image of "a very pretty corpse" (115) conjured up by Orvil in the same scene. Through these descriptions, Aphra's exit from the story is essentially thematised as her death.

When Orvil finds Aphra and Charles in the shell grotto near the hotel, Aphra's breasts seem to catch Orvil's attention: "Aphra's dress had slipped down and one of her full breasts lay outside, cushioned in the folds of midnight velvet. Charles had his

lips to the large coral nipple." (IYIP, 107.) Taken aback by what he has witnessed, Orvil involuntarily reimagines the scene:

Suddenly the extraordinary idea came to him that Aphra had been feeding Charles, pretending that he was her baby. [--] He saw Charles's lips and Aphra's breasts swelling and diminishing, like rubber objects first filled with air and then deflated. He saw jets of milk, and fountains pouring down. (IYIP, 108.)

Johnson (2008, 71) writes: "It is no accident, I think, that 'jugs' is slang for 'breasts'". Orvil cannot think about Aphra's breasts without thinking about reproduction; yet Aphra also resembles an inflatable sex doll in the vision, her breasts compared to "rubber objects". By making women inanimate through sexual idealisation, men have an opportunity to boost their confidence – playing with dolls shifts from a feminine weakness to a sign of masculine dominance (ibid. 164–165). However, Orvil's imagination in turn infantilises Charles through the image of breastfeeding, diminishing his masculine subjectivity; it is not only Aphra who is objectified by Orvil, but also Charles who becomes "her baby".

Studying how human relationships express things in *The Spoils of Poynton*, Brown (2003, 156) argues that a relationship in which women are treated as objects among others may not always be a form of oppression; in fact, it may move them outside the very social order that oppresses women, placing them into the world of objects and demonstrating a more equal and intimate connection. Somewhat similarly, Oulanne (2021) finds a potential of enhanced, extended agency in the thingification of women in Jean Rhys's, Djuna Barnes's, and Katherine Mansfield's short stories. Despite the penetrating, heteronormative poetics of objectifying women manifested in *In Youth is Pleasure*, could there also be an element like this in Aphra and Orvil's relationship? Leaving the hotel, Aphra's "expression went quite blank and she looked like a very pretty corpse seen through the bevelled-glass window of an expensive coffin. And that is how Orvil remembered her face – quite blank, with unreflecting eyes." (IYIP, 115.) The comparison recalls the brass lady, though Aphra's coffin (the car) has windows through which Orvil can see and describe her. This association reveals the complexity of the objectifying and thingifying dynamics related to Aphra – is this Orvil's final attempt to thingify Aphra, as her face becomes blank and eyes unreflecting in his memory, like those of a corpse or a doll?

What makes Orvil's relationship with Aphra different from his relationship with other material things is the lack of physical touch, or Orvil's inability to touch her like he touches, for instance, the brass lady. In a way, Orvil and Aphra's friendship, which contains their mutual affection for the object world, becomes something that defies social conventions as Orvil's affection for inanimate things extends to Aphra. This, in a sense, also queers their relationship. However, as shown above, Orvil is not unaffected by the ways in which the men around them objectify her; these repetitions of

compulsory heterosexuality and misogyny seep into the descriptions of Aphra's appearance and manifest themselves in his imaginations as sexualisation and objectification. Thus, Orvil's awkwardness around Aphra and the lack of physical touch can be read as a consciousness of this, as well as an unwillingness to repeat and reinforce the oppressive hegemonies related to sexuality and gender. The image of breastfeeding, for instance, is not something he wants to imagine: "Orvil could not rid his mind of the grotesque picture" (IYIP, 108).

As Oulanne (2021, 37) points out, "[w]omen are cast as things, but things have power." What makes the relationship between Aphra and Orvil more mutual is Orvil's willingness to make himself, too, into a thing. Like the other characters in the novel, Orvil is linked to inanimate things by analogy. He enjoys sharing a space with material objects as if he were one of them: "His pleasure lay chiefly in the fact that the man seemed to have accepted him as completely as he did the chairs and tables in the hut, or the trees outside" (IYIP, 86). The scene in the schoolmaster's hut will be looked at in more detail in the following chapter, but here, it is relevant to note how it constitutes a setting for Orvil's desire to be treated as a thing. Some of the many human-thing analogies in the novel are about Orvil himself: he goes to sleep "like an Egyptian mummy" (132), compares himself to a Baked Alaska, "one of those lovely puddings of ice-cream and hot sponge" (36), and delights in "the Greek sculpture effect which had been caused by his thin wet shirt clinging to his ribs and pectoral muscles" (112). Becoming a thing also works as a defence mechanism – Woods, a fellow student, bullies Orvil on the train back to school until Orvil cannot stand it any longer:

The strain was so great that a string seemed to snap in him. Suddenly he began to scream. The sound was piercing, like steam escaping. He kept utterly still on Woods's knee and let out this scream. He was a clockwork doll wound to its fullest extent. (IYIP, 169.)

While the metaphor is objectifying and synonymises Orvil with an over-exerted plaything, it animates him in a way that grants him agency and control over the situation as Ben hears Orvil's scream and comes to the rescue. The description of the scream, which sounds "like steam escaping" also likens the noise to a train whistle, a warning sign appropriate to the spatial context of the scene. Despite remaining still, Orvil becomes animated and active by becoming a clockwork doll. His wish to be a thing among things manifests here too, in other words, a desire to "become 'animated' as part of a vivid world of things", as a body "among bodies" (Oulanne 2021, 60). Moreover, the doll analogy associates Orvil with the descriptions that make Aphra doll-like. When Aphra's thingification is read alongside that of Orvil's, there can be seen an unconventional, descriptive kinship between them that is difficult to place into a category; it moves between thingification and objectification, between personhood and thinghood, effectively blurring these discourses and dichotomies.

4 *IN YOUTH IS PLEASURE AND THE DYNAMICS OF DESCRIPTION*

We can play along with the suggestions and conventions of the story, while also remaining rooted in the real world – and as I would like to emphasize, the material world (Oulanne 2021, 29).

Encounters between humans and things and literary descriptions of these encounters cannot be studied separately; the study of description is synonymous with the study of interaction between and within materialities that in turn entangle with the text and its different elements. The previous chapter ended with an analysis of how Orvil seeks to be made thing-like; in the following section, I draw more attention to the ways in which power relations and ideas of possession – be they between human beings or between humans and material objects – are related to the poetics of objectification and thingification, accompanied by an analysis of how the concept of possession manifests itself in the human–thing relationships of *In Youth is Pleasure*. From an examination of ‘unreal’ materialities present in Orvil’s dreams and imaginations that are both visual and material, I turn to the final analytical section of my thesis, a discussion of descriptive patterns, their queer potentials and problematics profoundly connected to the visual.

4.1 To possess and be possessed – things and power relations

There is undeniably an element of possessiveness to Orvil’s encounters with objects – the cottage orné near the hotel acts as an example of this desire, in part selfish and in part motivated by care and conservation, as Orvil fears that “its indifferent owners might destroy it” (IYIP, 28). Later in the story as Orvil explores the cottage and notices it has been neglected by its owners, he fantasises about restoring it:

Quickly, in his mind, he saw everything as he would make it: the beams recoiled, the floors scrubbed and polished, the leaded windows mended, the ivory torn away, and the fantastic Gothic paper repaired and patched as carefully as possible. He thought of the furniture, the extraordinary pieces he would find for each room. (IYIP, 105–106.)

Here, Orvil dreams of owning the place, fixing and redecorating it for himself. There is clear motive of preservation, a deep sense of sympathy for the cottage which has been cruelly left to decay, and a wish to give it a new life. The ‘museological’ discourse of conservation in is paralleled by a discourse of collection – Orvil’s little assortment of curiosities, “his cupboard of small treasures” (IYIP, 9). New objects are added to this collection, such as the broken saucer and the scent-bottle from the antique shop, constituting a so-called “self-made museum” which distributes value according to its own logic, having removed the object from its commercial context and exchangeable value (see Brown 2003, 104; 158). In addition, description itself can be seen as a kind of collection of details, the form of a list shared by both literary description and catalogues of objects (see Henderson 2010, 17).

Stealing also works as a type of collecting, as in the case of the razor that Orvil takes from his aunt’s attic, further complicating the concept of possession and its relation to ownership. Interestingly, the collected or stolen things gain no more narrative or descriptive significance than those that Orvil does not possess – perhaps even less. So, the concept of possession here is irreducible to ownership (Brown 2003, 13), despite Orvil’s evidently fetishist tendencies to isolate objects and protect them from destruction. Often, stealing an object is a fantasy rather than an act actually taking place: for instance, when he is with the brass lady, Orvil dreams of “despoiling” a skeleton of its “ancient ring” (IYIP, 67). It is as if the fantasy, inspired by the contact with the brass lady, possesses Orvil. The same applies to material things: the idea of inanimate things possessing Orvil instead of Orvil possessing them fits better as a characterisation of the novel’s human–thing relations. Material things draw Orvil in, assuming subject-like positions: the cottage orné, for instance, “entrances” him (28), possessing him but not allowing itself to be possessed. The most elaborate human–thing encounters in *In Youth is Pleasure*, such as the scenes with the old roller and the brass lady, follow this logic. In Brown’s (2003, 64) analysis of Norris’s *Vandover and the Brute*, losing oneself becomes simultaneous and synonymous with losing control of one’s things; in Welch’s novel, Orvil willingly gives up control of himself to things, seeking to be possessed rather than to possess, to be consumed rather than to consume. Material things have their own power, sometimes transferred onto human subjects who can use this thing-mediated power to gain authority or surrender to it.

On the level of description, the pleasure that Orvil derives from serving others is inseparable from material objects. For instance, Orvil immediately fulfils Aphra’s wish and fetches her paper block and pen, “delighted to be able to do this for Aphra” (IYIP, 95). He also dries Ben’s back with a towel without complaint (50), and even

arranges Charles's clothes like a valet (156), though he can hardly stand his eldest brother. Taking a submissive role, Orvil finds excitement in interactions with the object world that somehow physically restrict him or cause pain: the strap scene and the roller scene act as examples of this (see Chapter 3.2). As noted, these interactions shift power relations, placing Orvil in the position of an object that is, in a way, used. In terms of power relations and possession, especially the roller scene becomes interesting – Orvil is excited by the feeling of his body being confined to a material thing, which leads to more fantasies of submission as Orvil addresses an imaginary figure of authority, a “sir” whom he wishes to please, and chants aloud, “[y]ou bet I’ll lick your boots, sir!” (59). Orvil often experiments with things with the purpose of producing a physical reaction, or to reduce his ability to move: in his room at the hotel, he shuts himself in a wardrobe, as well as a drawer of a dressing chest (see also Croft 2006). By doing so he gets to be inside the material object, physically surrounded by it, filling the space within it. In a way, this scene fits Orvil’s habit of repurposing objects: instead of clothes, the wardrobe and the drawer now store Orvil.

The schoolmaster with whom Orvil has an ambivalent and intense relationship cannot be omitted from the discussions of possession and service either. When Orvil visits his hut, they end up in a strange power play where Orvil at first takes a submissive role.

‘Take off all your wet things and put on that old dressing-gown hanging on the back of the door’, [the schoolmaster] said, still without turning his head. [--]

Orvil did not want to take his clothes off, uncomfortable as they were. ‘Oh, I’m quite alright, thank you,’ he said with rather an uneasy hearty laugh. ‘I’ll get quite dry again when the sun comes out after the storm. It can’t last much longer now.’

There was silence for a moment; then the man turned round.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ He asked this question in the quietly ominous tone which is always used for it. (IYIP, 75.)

As both the man and Orvil get undressed, the articles of clothing participate actively in building the master/slave dynamics between the two of them. While the motive is getting out of the wet clothes, there is a sexual undercurrent in the scene, the man telling Orvil to undress and Orvil complying, impressed by his authority. The man’s motives remain unclear, but he seems to enjoy taking care of Orvil and assigning him small tasks. Orvil’s liking to the man is characterised by a wish to somehow be useful to him, as he is “quite willing to do odd jobs for the man” and even wants “to stay in the hut for ever, singing and talking and helping to do the housework” (IYIP, 84; 85). Like Aphra became synonymous with her things, so does the man with the hut and all its objects that Orvil observes and touches.

While deriving pleasure from serving the man, his authority also contradicts Orvil. Annoyed by the man’s idleness as he is doing the dishes, he proceeds to exaggerate his role as a servant, channelling his annoyance into a performance:

'The lazy sod just sits there on his arse, pretending I'm his slave,' he said to himself, with a tingle. Usually, he hardly ever used these particular coarse words, but something prompted him to do so now.

When he had polished the last piece of china, he turned to the man and said in burlesque impudent servant's language, 'Will you be wanting anything else, sir?' (IYIP, 85.)

The contrast between respect and disrespect is evident here, as the schoolmaster is referred to both as a 'sod' and a 'sir'. The former, a slur coming from the word 'sodomite' is used by Orvil rather to regain control of the situation than to call the man a homosexual, though this level of meaning cannot be separated from the word. Orvil's obedience has its limits, and he becomes alarmed when he feels like he cannot escape, as he does in the scene where he has shut himself in a drawer and starts panicking, "overcome with the horror of being a prisoner" (IYIP, 48). Something similar happens when the man teaches Orvil knots and ends up tying his hands together and lifting him by the rope painfully. Sensing that he may have crossed a line, the man surrenders some of his authority to Orvil in an almost flirtatious way: "'Now it's your turn,' he said; 'you can tie me up exactly as you like'" (87). The rope is used here as a tool to tie someone up and overpower them, but it is also a thing that the schoolmaster uses to prolong Orvil's stay. Narratively, the bondage scene comes to manifest the shifting power dynamics between Orvil and the man, marking the climax of their encounter.

Later in the story Orvil seeks out the man again because he wants "to stop using his own will" (IYIP, 147), hoping to be comforted by his strength and advise. Orvil does end up opening up to the man, but not before spying on him and trying to escape him. When the man tackles Orvil to the ground, Orvil defends himself violently, kicking the man's face and drawing blood until the man manages to take control again.

'Now, what's wrong with you?' he asked in an elaborately grim, analytical voice.

Tears were pouring down Orvil's face. [--] He jerked his head from side to side, never looking once at the man.

'I can't, I can't, I can't,' he shouted. He was speaking to no one, only fighting with himself.

'Can't what?' asked the man flatly.

'Get away, swine!' Orvil spat at him.

The man quietly hit him in the face. The stinging blow seemed to wake Orvil. It made him look quite calmly up into the man's face. [--]

'Why did you play tricks on me and run away?' asked the man.

'I don't know, I suddenly thought I couldn't face you.' (IYIP, 150-151.)

Orvil's unwillingness to face the man is targeted at his physical face which Orvil tries to damage. The face, signifying identity and humanity, is made into an object of violence, which on the one hand can be seen to symbolise Orvil's reluctance to know or recognise him. On the other hand, it comes to mean the deconstruction of human identity altogether; the schoolmaster is usually referred to as "the man", a name that lacks individuality and personality, enabling a reading where he turns into a universal figure, a representative of all manhood. This stripping of identity is accompanied by de-personifying descriptions that liken him to a machine, his voice "analytical" and

“flat”. The man/the schoolmaster, an authorial figure, is something Orvil cannot escape, a thing that inspires in him ambivalent emotions from compliance to resistance, from desire to rage. In a way, the man becomes yet another thing that Orvil seeks to be consumed by. Being stripped of his position as a subject in the conventional sense of the word, the man still preserves power and agency as an object. The poetics of thingification and objectification go hand in hand with this interpretation, as Orvil compares the man to a “porous statue that had soaked up some of his misery” (IYIP, 155). The analogy not only likens the man to an inanimate thing, but also instrumentalises him to achieve a desired purpose.

Possession and power are inevitably linked to performing gender. The dynamics of forcing and performing femininity are present in *In Youth is Pleasure* especially in relation to material objects. Orvil’s appearance is often considered feminine by others, and he is even misgendered as a girl by Guy’s and Constance’s grandmother who, in her defence, has bad eyesight (IYIP, 137). Orvil is confused and ashamed by this, as well as the other’s reactions – femininity, especially in men and boys, is seen as something inferior. As shown in the previous chapter, this attitude is strongly present in the ways Aphra is treated; the same kind of sexism is sometimes directed at Orvil, whose androgynous appearance gets unwanted attention. At the riverbank near the hotel, a group of “young men made cat-calls and screeching whistles” at him, mockingly calling him “darling” (42–43). At the very end of the novel, we get a taste of what Orvil’s life is like at school, as a fellow student Woods assaults him on the train:

Sitting down beside him and pretending that Orvil was a ravishing milkmaid, [Woods] leered in his seducer’s voice, ‘Well and how are you, my dear?’ This burlesquing of old-fashioned melodrama was one of his special tricks. He loved to play with Orvil in this way.

Masterfully he sat Orvil on his knee, and everyone laughed. He bounced him up and down, chanting ‘Ride a cock-horse.’ [--] Woods rocked him to and fro and recited, ‘Speak roughly to your little boy!’ At the end of each line he gave Orvil a frolicsome smack, pinch, tweak or punch. Orvil flinched but said nothing. Woods had not really hurt him. He was only playing. (IYIP, 167–168.)

Woods uses two songs in his bullying: “Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross”, an old nursery rhyme, and “Speak roughly to your little boy”, a lullaby from *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, parodying David Bates’ poem “Speak Gently” (Lancashire 1998). By pretending that Orvil is “a ravishing milkmaid” and reciting children’s songs to him, Woods both infantilises and sexualises Orvil. The expression ‘to ride a cock horse’ means straddling an adult’s knee or a toy horse (Opie & Opie 1997, 66). However, the word cock is also slang for penis, which gives the song a whole other meaning as Woods forces Orvil to sit on his lap and ride his knee. “Speak roughly to your little boy” in turn objectifies Orvil as Woods takes control over him both verbally and physically, making Orvil his ‘little boy’, a possession to be used however he likes.

Through the logics of inversion in *Alice's* wonderland, speaking gently switches to speaking roughly, which turns the act of soothing a child into an act of punishment:

'Speak roughly to your little boy,
And beat him when he sneezes;
He only does it to annoy,
because he knows it teases' (Carroll 2005, 56).

Just like the little boy's sneeze in the aggressive lullaby, Orvil's mere existence is enough to provoke a violent response. Still, Orvil maintains that Woods is "only playing" and yields to him, assuming the forced position as an object to be played with. This kind of role play enables Woods to maintain his heterosexuality and avoid being identified as queer – bullying Orvil by feminising him enforces the perception of Woods' heteronormative masculinity, positioning himself on the right side of the divide between homosexuality and homosociality.

While the objectification faced by both Orvil and Aphra sees femininity and womanhood as inferior, femininity is also something that Orvil intentionally explores and pursues. After kissing the brass lady, he wants to become her, and when there is a dance at the hotel, he wants to be a girl dancing with a man rather than Aphra's dance partner. The latter, however, is more about Orvil wanting men to overpower him than seeing femininity as something other than submission or an object to have ownership of. It is the scene after that which puts things in a different light – a lipstick stolen by Orvil earlier in the narrative adopts a central role, manifesting a freedom of self-expression in relation to a material object coded feminine:

Orvil went over to the glass, wound up the stick, and then began to cover his lips with a thick layer of colour. Soon they were gloriously cerise and sticky-looking. [--] He put two large circles of red on his cheeks and made himself into a Dutch doll. He frizzed his hair until he looked rather pretty and depraved. Still itching to use the paint, Orvil applied a large boozy crimson blob to the end of his nose. He grinned, and then began to make the flesh round his eyes terrifyingly inflamed.

He stuck out his tongue and made devil faces in the glass; [--]. When he undressed, he absent-mindedly rouged his nipples until they were like two squashed strawberries. He looked down at them vaguely and then began to rouge all extremities of his body – the finger-tips, the toes, the earlobes. Next, he made gashes and spots all over his body until he seemed entirely dressed in the crimson marks.

He put down the lipstick, lifted his arms above his head and started to sway and twist. He shut his eyes. It was the beginning of a dance. Slowly he floated over the floor, turning his wrists, and sometimes opening his eyes, and rolling them up to the ceiling. He kicked out his legs fiercely, crouched down, and then sprang into the air. He did this several times, till the floor trembled. Such an excitement possessed him that he shouted and sang and tried to leap on to the mantelpiece. He clung there for one second and then fell back on to Ben's bed. He bounced up and down on the springs, pretending that he was riding the wildest of horses. (IYIP, 98-99.)

Orvil's experiments with the lipstick go from painting his lips in a conventionally feminine manner to using the lipstick as rouge and painting "all extremities of his body". The resemblance between his rouged nipples and "squashed strawberries" recalls

Aphra's "large coral nipple" (IYIP, 107), bringing Orvil descriptively closer to Aphra and manifesting his desire to be like her and assume her position, instead of just dancing with her. Orvil ends up painting his body more or less randomly, going completely beyond the standard use of a lipstick to enhance one's beauty by colouring the lips. The more Orvil paints, the less he thinks about it, rouging himself "absent-mindedly". It is not only excitement that possesses him when he dances, but also the lipstick; an object that he owns and uses becomes a thing that he is possessed by, a thing that inspires him to dance wildly and express himself without the traditions, rules, and positions of power represented by the other dance going on at the hotel ballroom simultaneously. From the wish to perform a gender and conform to a role, things are taken completely beyond the logics of gender, a material thing having the power to transform and liberate Orvil.

The passage also contains discourses that I have analysed in the previous chapter: a comparison to a (Dutch) doll which Orvil now makes himself into, as well as an analogy between food and body parts, as his painted nipples resemble strawberries. The whole scene is framed by a mirror, a thing that objectifies Orvil as he uses it to put on the lipstick. Yet, the control of his own gaze falters, along with the beauty standards and customs of gender upheld by patriarchal and heteronormative conventions, as the lipstick partners him in a fierce, unrestrained dance in which he is "riding the wildest of horses" on his own terms, not forced to "ride a cock horse".

Orvil's desire to escape sociocultural restrictions also manifests in relation to the discourses of being something else, or nothing – to extend beyond his own body, or even beyond humanity and being alive. This is also related to gender and idea(l)s of masculinity – in many European languages, the words 'man' and 'human' are exchangeable. At the hotel, a boy from Stowe agrees to borrow Orvil his bicycle, yet Orvil is disturbed by his words:

'Oh, yes,' said the Stowe boy in his most tired voice, 'you can borrow it for as long as you like. I loathe riding it. The saddle seems specially designed to deprive one of one's manhood; but perhaps you won't mind that.'

[–] Orvil wished passionately that he had no body, so that these remarks could never be applied to him. He felt ashamed of being in a position to be deprived of one's manhood. (IYIP, 63.)

Rather than being insulted by the Stowe boy's remark per se, Orvil feels ashamed that such a remark can even be made about him. Here 'manhood' refers to male genitalia, yet Orvil thinks about its other meanings, "honour" and "virtue" (IYIP, 63). 'Manhood' has also been used to signify the condition of being human, which is, after all, how Orvil seems to understand the word. While Orvil's wish to have "no body" can be read as a wish to be entirely apart from the physical realm, it also reads as a refusal to identify as a man, and a desire to become something other than human, or animate. In other words, the Stowe boy's insult does not make him want to be more of a man,

but less of a human subject. As Orvil is leaving the hotel, the reader is presented with an image of his face breaking apart, the features becoming animate: “his features jumped and wriggled as if trying to escape from his face” (163). This reflects the “dislocated self-consciousness” associated with adolescence, as well as the feeling of not being home in one’s body and wanting to escape it, resulting in a crisis of the relationship between inside and outside, or mind and body (Croft 2006, 210–211). Coinciding with the modernist idea of the fragmented body (Hall & Watts 2019), the disintegrated, moving face is also queer, embodying a fluid and ever-changing identity, as well as a wish to escape societal norms and the unjust distribution of power within society.

4.2 “Rich dream closet” – real and unreal materialities

Orvil’s attention is not only caught by material objects in the physical reality of the narrative, but he also conjures up materialities in his mind. As Orvil is down with food poisoning at the school sanatorium in the beginning of the narrative and has strange visions, the other boys whisper: “Pym’s delirious, he’s seeing things!” (IYIP, 3). Orvil’s tendency to ‘see things’ continues throughout the narrative; some of these imaginations and dreams are intentionally made-up, others involuntary or unwanted, reflecting his wishes, desires, fears, and anxieties. Despite their nature as thoughts and dreams, the descriptions of these things can be very detailed, making them appear just as real or material as the objects that Orvil interacts with in the ‘real world’ represented in the novel. It has been argued that there is no dichotomy or tension between reality and dreams in Welch’s novels, which sometimes treat dreams as realities and realities as dreams (Girard 2001). As with ‘real’ materialities, Orvil projects himself into the imagined ones, making his thoughts and dreams into things that he interacts with, often visualising himself, too, in the process:

He found himself lying full-length in an enormous open wound. The exposed, gently bubbling cushiony flesh was very comfortable; but he knew that if he moved even his eyelid muscle he would inflict terrible pain on the giant in whose wounded red bosom he lay. In another dream, grotesquely enlarged diamonds waved about on long gold wires. They were contrived to look like sunflowers in a garden bed. Orvil was a very small child lost under the artificial leaves of these flowers. The wind blew; the diamonds rocked madly, backwards and forwards, banging their cruel facets against Orvil’s face. Like glittering, vicious footballs of ice, the huge diamonds struck his head, tearing the flesh till his eyes were filled with blood and he could feel the points of adamant ringing on white bone. (IYIP, 10.)

According to Hamon (1981, 184), details are used in description to make an impression of reality. However, Orvil’s dream contains detailed descriptions of the supernatural beings conjured up by his mind, giving them an appearance of reality even though

the reader is informed that the description is about a dream. Yet, the logics of the description hardly differ from the descriptions of 'real' objects. It is the content that makes the difference, as well as the transition between two images, which goes "[i]n another dream" rather than, for instance, "[w]alking behind the ballroom wing, he came to a meadow" (IYIP, 58). In the case of the latter, the transition is not followed by as detailed a description as in the dream; curiously, the dream is described more elaborately and thus, by Hamon's descriptive standards, made more *vraisemblable*, more credible than a scene in the reality of the narrative. This is an example of how Hamon's ideas of the natural placements and transitory functions of description can be applied to dreams and other unreal scenarios with the purpose of queering description – as form and content are in dialogue with one another, it is the supernatural and the unreal that become queerly naturalised through description.

The images of the giant's wound and the diamond sunflowers are embedded in physicality and contact with Orvil, or rather, the dream image of him. I am speaking of images, though it is not only the visual senses that are at play here; the adjectives describing the wound (cushiony, comfortable) are more connected to physical touch than eyesight. While the description of the flowers is perhaps more visual than that of the wound, the adjectives are emotive (mad, cruel, vicious), reflecting Orvil's physical pain. Eyes and vision are explicitly linked to the interactions happening in both dreams: in the first one, not being able to move "even his eyelid muscle" prevents Orvil from seeing and describing the wound's and the giant's appearances thoroughly. In the second dream Orvil's eyesight is restricted by his own blood, as his eyes are "filled" with it; yet, the loss of vision is not grieved, but simply replaced by feeling, even as the only thing left to feel is pain, or to inflict it. The latter he tries to avoid, not getting too comfortable in the "cushiony flesh" on the giant's wounded chest. Positioned in an opening of the giant's body, Orvil can be compared to a parasite that feeds on flesh, a *Maggot* like his father has nicknamed him, or perhaps to a leech used to cure wounds. The dream, thus, can be "terrifying", but also "wonderful" (IYIP, 10); the strange, gory images become interactions between material beings, blurring the boundaries between real and unreal, mind and matter.

Orvil has a lively imagination, inspired by his love for material objects. The hotel bathroom makes him wonder what it would be like to be imprisoned in a cell of the same size. But then, imagining a change in "[h]is set of circumstances" (IYIP, 61) he instead entertains the idea being a rich hermit, secluded in a small space furnished with beautiful things:

The walls of his tiny hermitage were entirely encrusted with precious stones, enamel and painting. There would be diamonds, sapphires, rubies, emeralds, topazes, carbuncles, garnets, agates, onyxes, aquamarines, jades, quartzes, pearls, amethysts, zircons, chalcedony, carnelian, turquoise, malachite, amber. Whenever he learned a new name, he added it to his list. Set in these stones were the most beautiful Italian primitives and Russian ikons, together with medieval Limoges enamel plaques. (IYIP, 61.)

The category of “precious stones” is filled with twenty items that correspond with it, and the list still grows along with Orvil’s knowledge. This element makes the list open-ended and subject to change, giving it a continuity that reaches outside the text, as the reader cannot find the implied additions within it. Thus, the list is not only a spatial element in the narrative, but also has a temporal dimension, as well as a metatextual one. The names of stones and other details in the passage are taken from *Apollo*, an art magazine Orvil reads at school – the memory of its contents enables him “to furnish the most intricate details for his fantastically rich dream closet” (IYIP, 61). While “dream closet” refers to the stone-embellished cabinet that Orvil dreams of living in, it can also mean a closet that contains Orvil’s dreams and thus, serve as a metaphor that reifies his mind.

Read as a metaphor, the dream closet renders Orvil’s thoughts into material things that can be stored in a physical space, taken out when needed and put back when finished with. Thoughts and emotions, when objectified, can be imagined as physically manageable; as things, they can be organised and arranged like components of a collection (Brown 2003, 165–166). Thus, Orvil’s dream closet becomes analogical with his “cupboard of small treasures” (see Chapter 4.1). Of course, a closet also has another metaphorical meaning, concealing a sexual identity that differs from heterosexuality. Though this metaphorical use of ‘closet’ probably did not start before the 1960s (Scott 2018, 146), it is likely that a modern reader makes this association. But unlike the general negative meanings given to a closet that hides one’s sexuality, the closet is something far more hopeful here, a place that Orvil can decorate with things and thoughts just as he pleases. He also attempts to accommodate his inner conflict and “unbearable” thoughts in the interiority of furniture, seeking shelter and domesticity that he has never properly had in his life, his mother being dead and father absent most of the time (Croft 2006, 220–221).

The materialisation of thoughts and emotions is present elsewhere in the narrative too, for example when Orvil tries to sleep but is bothered by an unnamed emotion which turns into a physical, concrete thing within his body: “Something in him would not rest. The feeling weighed him down. It became a physical discomfort, a lump in his stomach.” (IYIP, 103.) Similarly, the “bizarre things” that Orvil tries not to imagine become material: “He tried to think of sober things [--]. But the bizarre things won; they trampled others under foot and seemed to grow in extravagance.” (164.) Here, the word “thing” refers to both thoughts about things that have their designated ‘real-life’ equivalents, and to thoughts about things that do not exist as such in the story world – in other words, things somehow thwarted, relocated, or made up altogether. Yet, the thoughts themselves come to have an animated physical form, and as they fight for dominance, the “bizarre” ones crush the “sober” ones with their feet, growing and taking up space in the materialisation of Orvil’s mind.

Another example of how materialities provoke Orvil's imagination is the scene with the brass lady, where Orvil's mind goes from imagining the dead woman to imagining his own heart. Yet, as already noted in Chapter 3.2., he is still very much occupied with the material:

Orvil had a literal materialistic image of his own heart, soft, bleeding, frightening as butcher's meat. It was blind, yet with a life all its own. Orvil saw this thing thrown down on the stone slab [--]. He imagined the aromatic acrid dust rising up in a cloud and enveloping the wet cushiony heart, sticking to it and coating it, as breadcrumbs coat a succulent pink ham, or as bright-coloured bitter cocoa powder clings to the rich dark truffle. (IYIP, 68.)

This fantasy is a continuation of Orvil imagining himself as the brass lady: he does the same kind of 'unearthing' to his own body now, this time focusing on the heart instead of bones. Just like the giant's wound, Orvil's heart is described as "cushiony", as if its purpose was to serve as a comfortable pillow rather than to pump blood. At the same time, the heart becomes autonomous, separate from the rest of the body - "this thing" that has "a life all its own", almost like a fetish object, an animate/animistic thing that interacts with the materiality of the church (dust, stone slabs). In addition, the descriptive analogy between the heart and a "succulent pink ham" and "rich dark truffle" follows the logics of comparing human body parts to food. Here we come to note how the human body, also in Orvil's imaginations, becomes fragmented into different parts, shifting subject-object positions and reflecting its exterior conditions (see Hall & Watts 2019, 13).

Thoughts often have an agency of their own in *In Youth is Pleasure*; Orvil cannot help certain thoughts, and when they take over his mind, they are hard to get rid of. Reflecting on Freudian ideas of subjectivity, Johnson (2008, 50) writes: "Ego, id, and superego constantly struggle for control over the subject, whereas the 'self' is something the subject treats as an object." Here, Orvil's mind becomes an object of action as he tries to remove or replace undesired thoughts. These intrusive thoughts vary from bestiality (IYIP, 21) to breastfeeding (108) and returning to school (164). The thoughts get worse near the end of the holiday, and when Orvil visits his friend Guy in Hastings, he cannot control the bizarre imaginations of Guy's parents, Sir Robert and Lady Winkle. In these "most grotesque pictures" that crystallise "like a sinister kaleidoscope" (129), Sir Robert's features become comically and disturbingly zoomorphised, indeed grotesque in every sense of the word, while the descriptions of Lady Winkle focus on clothes and beauty-objects which in Orvil's mind assume strange proportions. The kaleidoscope comparison is also interesting: etymologically, kaleidoscope comes from the Greek words for 'beautiful' and 'form', here having a figurative meaning as a constantly changing presentation of images. Whether or not a conscious choice, the word "kaleidoscope" enables a reading where the imaginations of Sir Robert, as ludicrous, exaggerated, and troubling as they are, also have beauty in them. Or,

perhaps it is the mind's ability to produce such images that is both beautiful and disturbing. The picture of Aphra and Charles in the *grotto* is also *grotesque*⁵, described almost like a work of art that Orvil witnesses in the cave. Yet, it is Orvil's imagination that makes the picture more absurd and distorted.

To see something, a character must have an ability to see, a knowledge to see, and a will to see (Hamon's *pouvoir voir, savoir voir* and *vouloir voir*). In the realist and naturalist literature that Hamon studies, these conditions must be met to justify a visual description. (Hamon 1981, 187.) This logic is modified to the analysis of other kinds of descriptions, and some of its limits are also briefly considered; however, one might also add to them the level of imagination. Dreamed and unreal objects can also be described in ways which do not necessarily differ from the description of the 'reality' constructed by the narrative, as shown above. After penetrating the hidden depths of the shell grotto and surprising Aphra and Charles, Orvil uses his powers of imagination and tries to construct a more desirable version of what he has witnessed:

He slowed down to a gentle pace and reconstructed the extraordinary scene in the inner grotto. [--] He blamed Aphra severely for not finding someone better to lie with – some very fine man. This picture filled him with much lust. (YIP, 108.)

Here, Orvil has the will to imagine, but not the will to see. On the one hand, the description is limited to what Orvil has witnessed and thus, he fails to imagine anything else. On the other hand, one may ask whether it is actually the narrator that fails to describe what Orvil can clearly see in his mind, the picture of Aphra with an attractive man. The obscurity of the description encourages the reader to reconstruct the scene too, while the narrator seemingly loses control, creating an illusion of surrendering descriptive authority to the reader (see Hamon 1981, 203). The lust that Orvil feels imagining Aphra with another man intersects with this pervading sense of threat as aversion mixes with arousal. Orvil's desire is not for Aphra or the man specifically, but for watching them without being seen, or perhaps being able to imagine them over and over, to describe the scene to himself. Here, lust does not necessarily signify a sexual desire for somebody, but a longing for the acts of seeing and imagining that become inseparable, at the same time making desire itself into a concrete thing.

The objectified/thingified mind gains agency, a life of its own, as Orvil loses control of his thoughts. The attempts to possess his own mind are less about maintaining an illusion of subjectivity and more about trying to escape his imagination by focusing on the nonhuman, real-world materialities he enjoys interacting with:

To stop himself from picturing this nightmarish enlargement of things, Orvil looked around his room in a search for some reality on which to fix his mind. He concentrated on

⁵ Etymologically, 'grotesque' comes from the Old French word *crote* and the Italian word *grotto* which, in addition to denoting cave or cavern, can also mean a room in an ancient Roman building, containing murals painted in the 'grotesque' style (Oxford English Dictionary 2023).

an 'Adam' mirror; old, imitation, once gilt, now painted white, the white paint chipping off, some of the plaster knocked from the spidery wreaths showing the wire skeleton underneath. (IYIP, 131.)

While detailed, the description of the mirror is somewhat weary, a hastily made list of its characteristics. The narrator channels Orvil's distaste; unlike many other shabby objects, he does not like the mirror: "It too seemed horrible" (IYIP, 131). On the one hand, this reads as Orvil's failure to become immersed in the materiality of the thing; on the other, it is a failure, or refusal, to find his own self and objectify it through the mirror - he is not made into an image or an object through a description of what is reflected in the mirror. As Brown (2003, 49) writes, "objects always mediate identity, and always fail to." Yet again, the loss of self is not linked to the loss of an object; rather, it results from an inability to find and lose oneself in a material thing. Sometimes, on the other hand, it is reality that Orvil wants to escape: he tries to make the involuntary thoughts about school disappear by replacing them with other images: "His thoughts were becoming uncontrollable. To stop their unbearable flow he told himself stories in pictures." (IYIP, 144.) One could say that Orvil is afraid of everything that narration and eventfulness represent, in other words, the passing of time; he finds comfort in description, along with the illusion of stillness and spatiality created by it. This aspect fits into a narrative that does not adopt conventional ideas of development and growth (see Clarke 2020).

Orvil's imaginary scenarios come to rest on different materialities: "He was working on something at a desk. It might have been a book, or a painting, or even a wool mat." (IYIP, 145.) The alternative future scenario is very much focused on material objects and Orvil's interaction with them, but he is not able to produce a more specific image, ending up with a more of a guess of what that "something" might be. Orvil cannot seem to be able produce detailed images of 'normal' things, or things that comfort him; instead, the "bizarre things" take over, the ones with "iron beds like black enamelled skeletons" or rivers "swollen with the filth of ten thousand cities" (164). The detailedness of these images contrast the blurred quality of the vision of future quoted above, as well as the disinterested description of the 'Adam' mirror. It may be that the anxiety of going back to school is so strong that it prevents Orvil from imagining "sober", solid, and reassuring things. Or, it is the "grotesque pictures" that actually fascinate him more than the 'normal', unthreatening ones, somewhat like the "alarming" armadillo bag described in more detail than any other thing in the antique shop. This uncertainty, I would argue, is at the heart of Orvil's relations with materialities, be they real or unreal: the constant circulation of wanting and not wanting, the movement between disgust and desire, which makes the seemingly contrasting emotions inseparable.

4.3 Queering descriptive patterns and visibility

I started my analysis of human-thing relationships in *In Youth is Pleasure* with the observation that Orvil is often drawn to curious and worn objects that have little to no exchange value. In addition, Orvil's interactions with objects are hardly ever dominated by the concept of ownership – rather, it is the material thing that possesses Orvil. These elements are manifested in the systems and orders of description, to which I will dedicate the remainder of my analysis, also discussing the potentials and problematics related to visual perception. The antique shop, where Orvil finds the armadillo bag, the broken but mended saucer, and the scent-bottle, is one example of how description is inserted into the story:

He noticed with delight that a large antique and junk shop stood on the opposite side of the road some way ahead. He hurried towards it. The window rambled across the fronts of two houses, one large and one small, so there was much crookedness and contrivance. I do not mean that the effect was quaint; it was merely interesting in its obscurity and suggestion of hidden things. The eye had to dodge small iron supports and girders as it tried to penetrate to the back of the shop.

Orvil stood in front of this large window and started to look methodically along the loaded shelves and tables. He was pleased and relieved to see that it was in no way a polished, licked-up, expensive-looking antique shop. It was dusty and dirty and extremely untidy, with a great deal of household rubbish lying about in heaps.

He knew in a moment that he was going to buy something here. He was only waiting for his eye to come to rest on the right object.

It was not until he reached the far corner of the window that he came upon the little shelf of oddments: [--].

Still farther on the shelf, [--].

He opened the door quickly, without giving his nervousness too much time to grow. [--]

He looked about, trying to find a really beautiful object, but his eye was suddenly caught by something so alarming that it forgot its search. (IYIP, 52-54.)

According to Hamon (1981, 181), any movement of character from one place to another 'naturally' triggers a description; so is the case here, as Orvil runs from the boat-house into town, the movement and change of scene followed by a description of the antique/junk shop which attracts Orvil's attention immediately. The overall descriptive logic of the passage is based on movement from general to specific, outside to inside, front to back. However, the descriptive components and their placements within the passage partly disturb these manifestations of hierarchy and "natural" order (see Viikari 1993, 64); the objects placed in the most visible spots in the window are skipped entirely, as Orvil's attention is fixed on the "oddments" in "the far corner of the window". This focus leads the reader to assume that the most presentable and conventional objects that are seen first are trivial to Orvil (or the narrator/describer). The hierarchy that is manifested in the shop window does not cater to his interests, so it is changed through the focus of description.

The junk shop as a descriptive system effectively embodies the shifts, even reversals, of value systems that underlie the object world of the novel and its thing-

character relations. Yet, there is always a hierarchy that description mimics, a composition it refers to (Hamon 1981, 75). The inversion of a hierarchy creates a different one, repeated throughout the novel as junk is transformed into treasures, excrement into items of luxury, and so on. While this, together with the placement of description, creates a sort of a cohesion or correlation within and between descriptive units, there are also elements in the passage above that trouble the naturalising and transitional functions of description. Hamon's (ibid. 182) idea that description is framed by two narrative statements, between two correlating terms (Orvil entering and exiting the antique shop) does not apply here; the insides of the shop are described from the outside as Orvil looks through the window "methodically", focusing on finding the most curious things. In a way, this reverses the Hamonian descriptive frame where a character looks out of a window, justifying a description of the view: the gaze is instead directed from the outside to the inside of a space. While there is nothing particularly voyeuristic about looking at a shop window, there is undoubtedly a voyeuristic aspect in Orvil's gaze, as he tries to find what is hidden and penetrate the far corners of the shop window with his eyes. The suggestion of voyeurism also comes retroactively, through similar descriptive frames that appear later in the timeline of the novel.

The antique shop functions as a denominator, combining the terms relating to it into entities where different relations and correspondences are formed between words. There is also a rare appearance of the narrating "I" in the passage; it is almost as if the narrator assumes personhood only to specify a description of the shop. The focalisation remains on Orvil as the narrator emerges to justify the following descriptive focuses; the shop fascinates Orvil because it is queer, rather than "quaint" - unpredictable and awry rather than safe and charming - and because it grants the possibility to use the powers of vision in a voyeuristic manner. The words used to describe the outer appearance of the shop now extend to its insides, as Orvil searches for the unusual objects in the window. The narrator also mentions the obstacles of looking and describing, the "small iron supporters and girders." Through these descriptive, visual paths the narrator reveals something about the character, at the same time building and justifying a particular system of description.

Hamon's (1981, 202) *travailleur descripteur*, or "Homeric" description that takes the form of a series of actions is interesting in terms of the analysis of descriptive systems, conventions, and subject-object positions in Welch's novel. As Orvil goes paddling along the river and sees the schoolmaster for the first time, accompanied by boy scouts, descriptions of their actions ensue:

The man of the scarlet canoe sat majestically behind a small fire, stirring something in an aluminium pan. The two boys were in and out of the hut, fetching things to lay on the table which stood beside the man, doing his bidding in every small thing. [--]

The boys brought camp-stools from the hut and sat down at the table; then the man left the fire and poured rich pinkish cocoa from the pan into their mugs. He also brought potatoes which had been baking in the blue ashes, and a red earthenware dish which had been

kept hot there. In the dish were sausages, eggs, bacon, sardines, tomatoes and mushrooms. [--]

As Orvil hungrily watched the man helping the boys to this rich dish, he wondered what the time was. Lunch at the hotel had probably been finished long ago. But his hunger was not for the food but for the joyful life of these others. (IYIP, 37–38.)

The passage, based on Orvil's visual observations, describes the boys at work, helping the man to prepare lunch. In this type of description, the characters become indistinguishable from their environment and the progression of the scene (Hamon 1981, 207). Thematically, this correlates with Orvil's longing, "his hunger" to be one of them and to belong in nature. The description of the scene is part of a sequence in which Orvil explores the area of the river, motivated by his wish to be "as far away as possible from all signs of civilisation" (IYIP, 35). Thus, the man and the boys are conceptualised as the narrative-descriptive construction of nature/environment, rather than that of human characters. The sequence inserts pastoral elements into the narrative, contrasting Orvil's general obsession with cultural materialities, and it can be read either as a manifestation of heteromascularity that Orvil is pressured to belong to, or as a possibility to explore one's sexuality, provided by the cover of masculine bonding. The latter interpretation thematises the scene as queer pastoral, which works as a counter-discourse to the heterosexualisation of nature and the naturalisation of heterosexuality, embracing the homoerotic potential of rural spaces (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson 2010, 23).

In addition to the genre-play with pastoral, the descriptive frames of the scene are borrowed from the conventions of travel literature, mediated by a walking or moving describer (see Hamon 1981, 189). Here, description places Orvil as the explorer, the subject of knowledge, who penetrates a space that is constructed as the 'other' of civilisation. The river becomes not only a path for Orvil's explorations, but also a route of description that contains both movement and pauses, varying positions that make it possible to see things from different distances and perspectives. The actions of the man and the boys are made into a moving image and, unlike Aphra and Charles in the grotto, something that Orvil truly wants to see, spying "on the scene through the long grass" from the other side of the river. The distance between Orvil and the objects of his observation is not specified but, given the fact that there is a river between them and his gaze is partly obscured by grass, the details of the description of foods are a little too detailed to be noticed by Orvil himself. Hence, the description begins to seem unnatural by Hamon's standards of justification, raising a question of the agency of description. Despite there not being a clear shift of focalisation, it is almost as if the descriptive power is transferred to the man who sees and has prepared the food. This authorial shift in description coheres with a thematic one: Orvil hears the man give orders to the boys and wants "more than anything else" (IYIP, 37) to fulfil his wishes and surrender his authority, as he later in the narrative does. Here, unlike in Hamon's

(1981, 207) study, the description of actions evokes authority; while the schoolmaster is thematised as environment, he is given agency both on the levels of story and discourse.

Demonstrating a voyeuristic descriptive frame in a different way than the antique shop and the river scenes, the cave scene with Aphra and Charles works as an example of an optical metaphor that characterises the inner workings of Orvil's mind: "[t]he frightening vignette, like something seen through a keyhole, still hung in the air" (IYIP, 108). While there is no actual keyhole through which Orvil might have seen Charles and Aphra, the voyeuristic topos is still referenced, likening Orvil to a peeping Tom who derives pleasure from secretly watching people in intimate and sexual settings, although here it is his own imagination rather than the actual event that arouses Orvil. The keyhole is metaphorical while simultaneously thingifying a thought, and the expression evokes a connection to another physical place and context, raising the question of what other keyholes Orvil has been peeking through. The grotesque "vignette" imagined by Orvil combines the visual and the textual, vignette meaning a photographic portrait as well as a verbal description, confirming that essentially, to see is to describe. The different, sometimes contrasting motivations of seeing and not seeing, describing and not describing, are present here, as the image of Charles and Aphra "hung in the air", transforming from a kind of a still-life into a feeling of unresolved tension that does not go away.

In another thematisation of an imagined gaze, Orvil uses the optical scale of panorama to picture his future self looking at him from above: "He tried to soar higher and higher, until he was perching on the pinnacle of a church steeple and looking down at the whole panorama of his life and seeing it lightly, as nothing" (IYIP, 167). According to Hamon (1981, 187), a panoramic description must be justified by the fact that the character has climbed to a high place, as well as sufficient lighting and the character's competence in terms of vision. Here, no such justifications are made as the panorama is imagined, metaphorically spatialising the entity of Orvil's life as well as imposing a temporal structure on the image by imagining a future. The panoramic view works here as a descriptive trope that, through its visual register, both idealises the self and distances it from the thinking subject, consequently making the self into the object of an imagined gaze.

The scene where Orvil explores the dingle near the hotel and ventures into the cottage orné at night acts as an example of how the conditions of seeing affect description. Here, the torch takes on a central role, mediating vision – it becomes something that embodies Orvil's will both to see and not to see: "Orvil quickly flashed his torch away, then mounted the tiny, ladderlike stairs. [--] As he climbed out of the window, he wanted to shine his torch through the glass in order to see the brilliant colours, but he dared not, remembering the noise. [--] Now that he had his torch, he was impatient

to see what lay inside.” (IYIP, 105–106.) Aided by the torch, vision is both a controllable and an uncontrollable thing: if Orvil does not want to look at something, he can switch off the torch or turn it away. But especially when the environment is unfamiliar, one can hardly choose what one sees; the torch can reveal disturbing things that one cannot help but see, such as the rotting body of a dead bird that Orvil quickly flashes his torch away from. Therefore, it is the torch, the source of light that comes to control Orvil rather than the other way around. Dark and blurred, the milieu of the dingle and the interior of the cottage as descriptive entities follow no designated orders or hierarchies that organise the things within them; instead, the light from the torch shows only glimpses that appear more or less coincidental. Yet, as elaborate descriptions, the things seen by Orvil cannot be considered random no more than restricted mode of seeing can be deemed unconventional. It is no coincidence that Orvil catches “a glimpse of the diminutive tombstones, like a giant’s dominoes, half-buried in the ground” (104) and sees the “elaborate Gothic paper”, “made to imitate stone arcades filled with cinquefoil tracery” (105). The description of the Gothic wallpaper is justified by Orvil’s attention to detail throughout the narrative, while the analogy between tombstones and “giant’s dominoes” follows its own logic, linking the cemetery to the cottage orné which has been described as “a giant’s beautifully decorated ink-pot” (28), and even to the dream where Orvil’s lies in a giant’s wound (10).

Like in the antique shop and dingle scenes, windows act as things/motifs that enable description and function as intermediate spaces between inside and outside. A window is an object that can be located referentially, as well as a literary device, a topos that introduces description into the narrative. Thus, a window (or any other liminal space, such as a door, threshold, or porch) frames an opening into a textual fragment, thematising and organising description (Hamon 1981, 224–225; 227–228.) In the scene discussed above, windows operate less as divisions between interior and exterior spaces and more as points of entry and exit. As it is dark both inside and outside the cottage, windows are also objects of attention and inquiry (like the stained-glass window) rather than frames producing describable images. In the same way that Orvil’s interactions with objects go beyond intended purposes and instrumentality, the topos or the descriptive form of the window is queerly disturbed in the dingle/cottage orné scene. Yet, the window still embodies the line between private and public space, making Orvil’s actions appear intrusive, a violation of privacy (see *ibid.* 231): planning to break into the cottage with the help of a knife, he feels “delightfully like a criminal” (IYIP, 104).

The pleasure Orvil derives from entering spaces he is not supposed to enter and seeing things he is not supposed to see, is manifested in the river scene discussed above, as well as in the scene where Orvil spies on the man through the hut window. While the latter is thematically linked to other voyeuristic visual descriptions, sound

plays a central part, as Orvil listens to the man sing “Mirror, mirror in my hand”, joining him eventually. Their voices cross the liminal space between them, becoming something that both transcends the visual frame of the window and produces more visual description: “Suddenly, on impulse, Orvil joined in high above the man. [--] From this position he could just see the man’s head. He saw it jerk up in surprise. The eyes searched from side to side” (IYIP, 148.) Here, the description provoked by sound works to blur interior and exterior spaces, perhaps to a degree that Orvil is not comfortable with. Caught by the man in the woods, Orvil regrets opening up to him and tells himself that it is best “to talk to an unknown person, to leave everything in a dark cloud. [--] Never to know him again was the freest thing; to remember only a man who sang ‘Mirror, mirror in my hand’ as he mended his trousers.” (155.) In an earlier analysis (Chapter 4.1), I discussed how the scene centres around the man’s face and Orvil’s reluctance to face him. Yet, Orvil ends up facing him but does not want to know him; he would rather they remained distant, wanting to remember the man only as a picture framed by the hut window, a still-life with a screen between them. The intimate, ambiguous connection between them thus becomes a thing that Orvil attempts to control through the visual senses. Building onto my previous interpretations, the queerness of the relationship between Orvil and the man is manifested in the processes of thingification and visualisation constantly at play when they meet, interlinking with the ambivalence that characterises the complex demarcation of power and knowledge between them.

The choice of song, referencing Disney’s 1937 film *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, is interesting as well; from the perspective of description, mirrors are comparable to windows in the sense that they too frame a scene, often a reflection of a character, enabling a psychological analysis of the self (Hamon 1981, 188–189). Here, the mirror is present only as a reference to the “Magic Mirror” in *Snow White*, but it can be read as a thematisation of the interplay between sound and vision in the scene, as well as a sign for the man’s lack of identity, coinciding with a description of his deep, yet hollow eyes: “[Orvil] saw that they were made of long tingling spears of brown and green and grey and yellow; – and underneath, behind, – a hollowness, a deep black cave of seeing darkness” (IYIP, 150).

The poetics of anthropomorphism and personification in the novel are strongly related to the visual:

The things in the room had changed; the wardrobe, the chest of drawers, the chairs had souls. Deep down in their evil souls they waited, knowing that he had to go back to school. They were quite still and watching, not caring at all, only waiting frigidly to have the room to themselves again. Even the eiderdown stored evil knowledge. (IYIP, 161.)

Here, the inanimate objects in the room are given an interiority, a soul, and made animate through personification which focuses on the visual, watching Orvil and

waiting for him to leave. Orvil appears here as the intruder, the object of the things' gaze, as the objects gain agency and strive to be in full possession of the room, waiting to supplant human authority and ownership. The passage can be read anthropocentrically as a reflection of Orvil's anxiety, the objects embodying society's expectations. However, it is the animated and personified features that make the things seem evil and uncaring to him. This suggests that what in fact bothers Orvil is the humanisation of inanimate things – he cannot find a way to interact with objects that assume person-like features. In this scene, vision is linked to knowledge and Orvil feels threatened by it – by being seen and being known – rather than by the objects themselves. Hall and Watts (2019, 13) write about the challenges that the fragmented body faces dealing with “post-Enlightenment ways of knowing, which housed knowledge within the ‘ocular-centric’ paradigm of Western philosophical thought.” Also discussed by Foucault, the dominance of the visual paradigm as the superior mode of knowledge has been critiqued by queer theorists: queer formalism, for example, seeks to embrace other, more sensual and less normative modes of knowing, working *around* the visual paradigm (Amin, Musser & Pérez 2017, 233).

Yet, there are instances in *In Youth is Pleasure* where vision and visibility seem to create possibilities: the mirrors in the roller and the lipstick scenes participate in Orvil's self-expression and sexual experimentation, while the visual settings of the antique shop and the conditions of seeing in the dingle scene result in unexpected discoveries. In all these cases, the visual has a way of extending to the bodily and entangling with other senses. To conclude my analysis, I would like to tackle one more example of Orvil's explorations and experimentations in relation to the material. In the writing room of the hotel, Orvil finds an old-fashioned, Edwardian book on physical culture, the cover of which is “decorated with a strong man bending his arms” (IYIP, 44).

He was beginning to delight in his body. He longed to make it like the body of the coarse man on the cover of the book. He hoped that he would grow much taller.

Now that he was becoming so interested in his body, he felt that his clothes were no longer in keeping with his new character. They were not at all sporting or tough. (IYIP, 48-49.)

“[T]he ideal self pursued by the subject is aesthetic, and this ‘cult of form’ may be related to the human capacity to love an image,” Johnson writes (2008, 121-122). Strongly affected by the book, especially by its cover, Orvil begins to exercise with extreme methods, wrapping the eiderdowns from the beds around him and shutting himself in a wardrobe, as well as a drawer of a dressing-chest. The desire to make oneself picture-like leads to experimentation with these material things, Orvil becoming an object stored within a confined place (see Chapter 4.1). Quite different from the ‘store’ (*magasin* in French) that metaphorises the descriptive text and its accumulation of visual details (Hamon 1981, 226), the things within the wardrobe and the drawer

are not visible to the spectator, having a similar hidden interiority as the shoes that Orvil polishes. So, the wish to make oneself into an image curiously leads to hiding oneself from view, paralleled with a visualisation that results in objectification (see Amin, Musser & Pérez 2017, 233).

Yet, the act of shutting himself into these confined spaces makes Orvil anxious, just like his “dream closet” sometimes does. Croft (2006, 220–221) discusses the conflict linked to these spaces which, along with blurring the boundaries between Orvil’s body and the things he interacts with, both draw him in and push him out. While acknowledging the material agency of the drawer and the wardrobe, they can be read as metaphors for concealing one’s sexuality, a closet that Orvil is tempted to shut himself in but always fails to. Coming out, often narrativised as a singular event, is repeated over and over in a process that never really ends (or begins) in a society dominated by heteronormative attitudes. Returning to the book about body building and the ambivalence of its impact on Orvil, we can see how the visual is linked to other forms: on one hand, the book visually represents a normative, ideal masculinity, an unattainable ideal most likely resulting in body image issues. On the other hand, it creates a condition of possibility, a chance to discover one’s body in relation to the material world, not only shifting from vision to other senses and ways of knowing, but also combining nonhuman and human, animate and inanimate materialities. Visuality co-operates here with the processes of rendering humans thing-like, enabling a queer reclamation of visual descriptive form. Paralleled by the “rich dream closet” that both metaphorises and thingifies his imaginations, Orvil’s refusal (or failure) to be shut in a closet corresponds with his desire to make himself into a picture – to become visible, to see and be seen on his own terms.

5 CONCLUSION

The following research questions, presented in the introduction, have steered my reading of *In Youth is Pleasure*:

1. How is the interaction between humans and inanimate things described in Denton Welch's *In Youth is Pleasure*?
2. How can a queer perspective contribute to the analysis of materialities and their descriptions in Welch's novel?

In my analysis of Welch's novel, human-thing interaction not only means the physical interaction happening in the story world, but also the exchange of properties between humans and inanimate objects taking place through different devices of language and figures of speech. In terms of method, a focus on description has also allowed the analysis of the logics and schemes of description on a broader scale, seeking for patterns and hierarchies that characterise the novel's descriptive systems. A queer reading, conducted both on the levels of story and discourse, content and form – as they cannot be separated in the study of description – has provided me with tools to seek for the bizarre and ambivalent connections between materialities, embracing the heterogeneity and ambiguity of interpretation.

The main discoveries of my study are related to the ambivalence of thing-human interaction and its descriptions in *In Youth is Pleasure*. Orvil's encounters with material things are characterised by anti-instrumentality and eroticism, the link between the two constituting a defiance of heterosexuality and reproduction. As Clarke (2020, 2032) notes, there is no central, purposeful desire manifested in the novel, but "different forms of erotic and non-erotic identification, practice, and object choice." Material things play a central role in this reconceptualisation of desire and sexuality, as they resign from normative instrumentality and ownership defined by the logics of heterosexuality.

The misuse of things is manifested not only on the level of Orvil's material interactions with objects, but also on the levels of anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, personification, and thingification that hardly ever fill their conventional purposes. Welch's novel builds no dualism between thingification and personification, the excessive poetics of rendering humans thing-like not matched by a reverse discourse of anthropomorphising or personifying things; material objects are often animated and agential, but this does not always make them appear human. The notions of inanimateness and animateness are further disturbed as human body parts, sometimes fragmented and isolated from the body, are animated in the same way as objects and thoughts are. Materially or immaterially, the relationships between humans in *In Youth is Pleasure* are mediated and directed by things, queered by them too, as in Orvil's relationships with Aphra and the schoolmaster.

Thingification and objectification can easily be read as reductions of agency, considering how negatively and carelessly nonhuman things are often treated by humans. But in the context of *In Youth is Pleasure*, they can also be read as expansions of agency, accumulations of another kind of agency that human subjectivity does not allow. Objectification and thingification are only problematic if things and objects are treated as inferior, which most definitely is not the case in Welch's novel. This observation is in accordance with those made by Brown (2003) and Oulanne (2021) in their readings of material things in late 19th century and early 20th century literature. While the misogynist and heterosexist objectification and sexualisation directed at Aphra and sometimes at Orvil are evident, material things allow a rethinking of these discourses into potential agency, even liberation. Yet, I do not want to choose between these readings: even in a discriminating and hostile society people and things find ways to express themselves.

Relatedly, the fetishism manifested in the novel cannot be entirely reduced to Freudian and Marxist ideas, nor even modernist fetishism, as the flow of description moves Orvil quickly from object to object, not staying in the same place for long. This does not make Orvil's fetishism consumerist either, as he does not own or discard the objects he interacts with. Indeed, possession in *In Youth is Pleasure* is more about being possessed by things than owning them. The unique, singular quality of the descriptions of Orvil's encounters with the material world results in perceiving things as temporal and event-like. Like in Bradway's (2021) observations, narrative form is used here to reimagine form and relationality.

Analysing only one novel, I can hardly make generalisations of either the thing-human relations represented in literature or the adaptability of my theoretical framework into this discussion. But perhaps there may lie untapped potential in approaching literary materialities through a perspective that combines queer narratologies and theories of description. In the beginning of my thesis process, my assumption was that

Hamon's model would be, due to its structuralism, an easy target for queer criticism. Yet, I came to learn that Hamon's theory already contains elements that suit the destabilising goals of queer narrative theory, especially the observations Hamon (1981, 253–254) makes on Guy de Maupassant's descriptive frames which have the potential to disturb classifications and mimesis, resulting in chaos rather than hierarchy. The uncertainties and ambiguities of description – the quality of constantly seeking its place yet never truly fitting into a category – is made even more tangible in Viikari's (1993) and Mikkonen's (2005) readings of Hamon and other theories of description, which I see as having queer potential.

One interesting aspect related to Hamon's descriptive system is that characters in third-person narratives are always, on some level, objects of description, not only its producers through focalisation. The idea that description must be justified by a character's competence – the will, power, and knowledge to see, do, or say – leads to the observation that even when describing nonhuman objects, beings, and environments, the description always tells something about the character who is used as a 'gate' for describing. In other words, a character is both the means and the end of description (see Hamon 1981, 245), objectified by the narrator/describer. Viewing *In Youth is Pleasure* as Welch's diary adapted into an autofictive third-person narrative where the narrating "I" makes themselves (or, perhaps itself) visible enforces the idea of the self as an object, narrative form becoming itself a mirror that reflects the blurring of descriptive agency and the merging of subject and object.

Hamon's, Viikari's, and Mikkonen's ideas of description are all embedded in the visual. The hegemony of vision as a mode of knowledge and control has been criticised especially in Foucauldian and queer theoretical traditions. Despite these problematics, the visual becomes a source of potential in *In Youth is Pleasure*. Mirrors and windows as both concrete, material things and descriptive topoi enable a gaze that destabilises subject-object positions. Leaning on the visual and the material also blurs the line between reality and imagination, as Orvil's thoughts and dreams are made to resemble 'real' things through the use precise language and/or visual descriptive frames. Like between humans and things, there is a kind of an interchangeability between vision and other senses, evident for instance when Orvil explores the cottage orné and the cave. The rich sensory experiences resulting from the entanglement of the senses are also related to the (auto)erotic and voyeuristic gaze that characterises Orvil's explorations and experimentations. Furthermore, the desire to make oneself picture-like is linked to a desire to be seen on one's own terms, a freedom of expression enabled by vision. The problematics of the dominant, ocular-centric epistemologies can coexist with the narrative potential of visual descriptiveness that resists heteronormative temporality, like ekphrasis and spatiality do in Glavey's (2009) reading of *Nightwood*.

The possible weaknesses of my study lie in the characterisation of things as strange, bizarre, curious, queer. Using adjectives that have no clear definition and are largely depend on the attitudes, values, and preferences of their user pose a threat to the analysis, as practically anything could be deemed queer. There is also the ethical question of retrospective queering: examining a novel that was published nearly eighty years ago, we may also end up participating in the othering of sexual and gender minorities, or deeming peculiar something that back then was considered ordinary. The word 'queer' had different meanings during Welch's lifetime than it has today, used as an offensive term referring to sexual and gender minorities, or to signify something unconventional or strange, the latter meaning mostly present in *In Youth is Pleasure*. Yet, there is also potential in the undefined, unfixed quality of the word. Its reclamation by queer activists and theorists to mean what it does today parallels the discourses of positive thingification and elevating waste to value manifested in Welch's novel. I feel that my study has benefited from the ambiguous semantics of 'queer(ing)' coming from both my theoretical framework and the novel itself – it allows a multiplicity and an ambivalence of interpretation, not always entirely clear when it refers to sexuality and when to something else.

The ambivalent quality of Orvil's interactions with materialities is shown by my analysis of description; the reactions and feelings often labelled as opposites, such as desire and disgust, pain and pleasure, or love and hate, come to coexist in Welch's novel, descriptively blurred like humans and things are. This element is present both in Orvil's 'real-life' encounters with things/characters and in his imaginations, strongly rooted in the material. A study of description reveals that Orvil is nearly always fascinated with the very same things he finds disturbing, deriving pleasure from efforts to distract himself. This ceaseless movement between wanting and not wanting is something that can only exist in relation to the material world that knits together the human and the nonhuman, the animate and the inanimate.

In Youth is Pleasure is an incredibly intricate and complex novel, overflowing with curious details and detailed curiosities; its in-depth analysis would need more than a single master's thesis. There are many fascinating elements in the novel that did not fit into my reading but could be suggested as ideas for future readings on Welch's works, which I hope to have inspired with my thesis. The themes of (mental) illness, neurodivergence, and disability manifested in Welch's writing are discussed in some studies and also mentioned in mine, but they deserve their own thorough and critical analysis. Moreover, *In Youth is Pleasure* calls for a postcolonial approach examining it as a product of its historical and cultural context, studying for instance the colonial connotations of 'exploring', along with descriptions that lean on racist, exoticising imagery and discourses that romanticise forced labour.

These ideas and perspectives can be linked to a broader study of Welch's other writing. A comparison between the descriptive logics of Welch's fiction and his journals might be fascinating due to the inter- and metatextual functions of description, as well as Welch's novels' status as autofiction. I also believe that the rest of Welch's works would yield to the theoretical and analytical perspectives employed in this study which is only one example of how thing theory, queer narratology, and theory of description can be used together in the analysis of prose. Building on this, there is also a possibility of a wider theoretical examination on how description may both be queered and participate in queering narrative. On my part, I hope to have done justice to one central element in Welch's writing, perhaps made the most vivid in *In Youth is Pleasure* – the mutual interaction and entanglement of humans and things.

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