

The Hollowed Men: Reflections of the Sixties Consumer Society

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If Jerome and Sylvie, from Georges Perec's 1965 novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties* (*Les Choses* in the original French), were characters in a movie, they would most likely be extras. They would have to stand for hours amongst a crowd that, for a moment, the protagonist glances toward before continuing on with her lines. They would technically be able to say that there were in a movie, yet they would be ultimately unnoticed and unlisted in the credits. They would probably not even see themselves when they reviewed the film months later. They would have been swallowed into the crowd. It would not, as they would say, be "the film they would have liked to live" (57). Yet, despite having 126 pages in which the plotline tracks their lives and they are essentially the only humans mentioned, they are not able to assert themselves as protagonists. Instead, they slip into the role of the "every man," a face amongst a crowd. In centering *Things* on the lives of two characters that lack agency, Perec forces us to identify the true protagonist of the novel: things. Perec seems to posit that identity is generated by the presence of a history or story—encapsulated in the French by the term *l'histoire*. Jerome and Sylvie, devoid of *une histoire* of their own, try to build their identity through the accumulation of objects. Attempting to gain an identity from the borrowed histories of the things they own, Jerome and Sylvie are "hollowed men" (78) who serve as representations of their generation, serving as both a reflection and a warning to future consumer generations.

In *Things* objects appear to have more identity and agency than the human characters. The first chapter opens with images of "a silver fob watch" (21), "a miniature in an oval frame" (21), and an "old desk lamp" (24), among others. These are items with a past. Each item mentioned can trace its story somewhere back into history. The watch invokes ideas of wealth and status—perhaps owned by the younger son of a wealthy gentleman who set out to make his own fortune—while the description of the miniature portrait dates it back in time when it was popular for everyone to have a likeness done of themselves. Perec deliberately chooses to tell the reader that it is an "old" desk lamp, implying that the lamp had once had another home before it rested upon this desk. The very idea and appeal of vintage or antique items is that they come with a story. It seems possible, then, that by accumulating enough "storied" items—like Jerome and Sylvie—one can inherit these histories, thus further enriching one's own story. However, this new identity that is created is borrowed and artificial.

Through their artificial new identities, Jerome and Sylvie attempt to write themselves into a past that, as the new generation, they have forgotten. Unlike the generation directly following World War II and the Occupation, the sixties did not have the recent trauma of starvation fueling their desire for consumption. It was a consumer society without the recent history supporting it. Likewise, Jerome and Sylvie appear to have stepped out of time. Their description of desire for a plentiful, abundance of food (25) demonstrates their lack of history when food was hard to come by. For characters who discuss "History in nothing smaller than centuries" (71), the marketing language of the "future conditional" is appealing, since, lacking the ability to track significant moments in history, these characters can only measure the passing of time by their ownership and accumulation of items. In turn, the future conditional becomes the language of their desire—constantly promising a new horizon and the possibility of a better future. However, it is this unquenchable desire that robs them of their power to actually attain the future that they are seeking.

Unlike the human characters in the novel, the things themselves have agency. Despite Jerome and Sylvie's inability to shape their lives, even the items in their all-or-nothing dreams

have agency as “tables set themselves” (91), “lifts bore them upward” (91), and “doors opened in front of them” (91). In their idea house from the first chapter, the table has the power to “bring you eye back to the leather curtain” (22) and somehow the bed is ready “made up and turned down for the night” (23). Without either the agency or the history of the things that surround them, Jerome and Sylvie fail to sustain an identity of their own and, instead, come to be defined entirely in terms of what they own.

Lacking an identity of their own, Jerome and Sylvie become shells in which the reader can inhabit: “They were the hollowed men, the turkey round the stuffing...faithfully reflecting a world which taunted them” (78). For the first ten pages of the novel, a ubiquitous “they” permeates the page. It is not until page thirty that the names “Jerome” and “Sylvie” are even mentioned. During these first ten pages, a generic facelessness of these two characters becomes established—a male and a female likeness upon which the reader cannot help but begin to imagine oneself into the empty space, allowing one’s own personality to fill the void. This merging process continues throughout the text until the reader has managed to impose the reader’s own identity onto the characters, identifying shared desires.

Yet, despite the attempt to falsify themselves an identity, “when it came down to it, [they were] alone, stationary and a bit hollow” (94). In the culmination of their all-or-nothing fantasy—in which they try to envision the “all”—the instability of their fantasy collapses under the weight of their desires, causing them to feel “crushed” (95). This “hollowness” which at first was an invitation for the reader to identify with the characters now feels confining. When faced with their life in Sfax, Jerome and Sylvie attempt to fill their void by accumulating more things: “all the things, which not so long ago had constituted the décor of their lives, all the things which took them back from this universe of sand and stone to Rue de Quatrefages” (104). During this encounter with the “real world”, the tense shifts from future conditional to past tense. For a brief moment, the couple experiment with a life in which there is an “absence of all things” (113). They exert themselves for the first time, yet it is apathy they find, not happiness. They cannot stop feeling indifferent and lost in their flat that was “altogether too big and too bare for them to be able to live in” (104). Despite the artificiality of their lives and their borrowed stories, it was their things that defined who they are. Without their apartment in Paris and daily routines of looking through vintage stores, they can no longer pretend to be part of the story there had been holding the threads of their narrative together.

In a quest to generate a story of their own by moving to Sfax, they fall short and do not even have the future conditional or the borrowed story of their things to fall back on. In Sfax, they find themselves living in “a world without memories, without memory” (118) in which they “bought nothing ... because they did not feel drawn to these things” (116). For products of their consumer society, this is a tragedy indeed. However, once they return to Paris, and pick up the threads of their old life, they do commit to selling all of their possessions. For a moment, it appears that they are willing to live in reality, but the tense immediately returns to future conditional. They give up their belongings, but “the meal they will be served will be quite tasteless” because their desire for things still fuels them (126). They still dream of “huge empty rooms full of light; plenty of clearance, glass panels, magnificent outlook ... china, silver cutlery, lace napkins, sumptuous red leather binding” (125). They still “will have their whole lives ahead of them” (125). Ultimately, their identity has been their desire all along.

Despite having gained the appearance of an identity, Jerome and Sylvie are still “hollowed men” (78). The ease in which the reader can identify with Jerome and Sylvie allows them to serve as mirrors in which the fears and desires of the current generation are reflected. Thus, their failed attempts at finding an identity makes one question whether one’s own identity

has been created by objects as well. As they smile “at each other’s reflections in shop windows... untouched, it seemed by the passing of time,” Jerome and Sylvie are indeed figures untouched by time (58). Even fifty years later, the current generation is still able to relate to their struggles with identity in a consumerist society. With all of their desires, Jerome and Sylvie were products of their generation. The “spellbound webs” (75) of insatiable desire and an ever-growing consumer market that threatened the characters are the same as those that threaten society today. Ultimately, Perec leaves the reader with the same choice as Sylvie and Jerome: try to form an identity that is not based on things or forever chase insatiable desires in the future conditional.