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ON THEIR OWN PREMISES: SOUTHERN WOMEN WRITERS AND THE HOMEPLACE

CONSTANTE GONZÁLEZ GROBA



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Universitat de València

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*On Their Own Premises:
Southern Women Writers and the Homeplace*

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Once again to Ánxeles and Gloria

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Introduction

I come from people who believe the *home place* is as vital and necessary as the beating of your own heart. [...] It is your anchor in the world, that place, along with the memory of your kinsmen at the long supper table every night and the knowledge that it would always exist, if nowhere but in memory.

Harry Crews, *A Childhood: The Biography of a Place* 13-14

Domesticity has traditionally constituted an almost exclusively female domain, practiced to varying degrees by practically all women of all races, classes, and in all historical periods. Recent studies, such as Ann Romines's *The Home Plot* and Helen Levy's *Fiction of the Home Place*, have noted that in canonical literature domestic spaces and activities have commonly been ignored or treated as the marginal backdrop for the "significant" action carried out by male protagonists in the public sphere. However, Romines and Levy also describe how many American women writers place domestic activities at the center of their texts, thus making possible a new exploration of their rich meaning and significance. Women writers have thus found new patterns of expression, far removed from the long shadows of the great adventurous male protagonists of Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Herman Melville and James Fenimore Cooper. Writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, Willa Cather, Eudora Welty, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, amongst many others, have contributed to the rewriting of American literary history by bringing female experience to its center. In *The Wilderness Within: American Women Writers and Spiritual Quest*, Kristina Groover argues that despite its dominance as a theme in American literature, "a spiritual quest tradition which mandates solitary flight from family and community is a tradition which pointedly excludes women" (3). In her pioneering essay "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors" (1981), Nina Baym noticed that in American

society only men have traditionally had the mobility required to undertake “a believable flight into the wilderness” (72). Thus the American myth of the frontier excludes women from the role of the questing hero, affording them instead the role of domestic preservers and of the civilizing influence that the heroic Adam must leave behind.

Recent feminist-oriented studies in psychology and theology suggest that the quest motif is not only less accessible but also less enticing to women, for whom relationships and community are powerful, formative elements in daily life, preferable to the radical separation and individuation of the male quest myth. Even more problematic than the exclusion of women from the quest myth is the notion of the quest as an archetypal, universal human experience, that is, as the conceptual framework through which we come to understand American culture. As Melody Graulich writes, “while the frontier dream of escape to freedom is a significant recurring pattern in American literature, it is only one of many and has often been too widely applied in defining the essential qualities of American literature” (188). To focus exclusively on quest as the embodiment of selfhood and spiritual enrichment, then, is to ignore alternative patterns of self-realization found in the texts of women writers. These texts constitute an inexhaustible source of women’s ways of knowing, taking as their setting the spaces and rituals of domesticity, from oral stories, gardening and quilt-making, to private letters and recipes, all testaments to the fact that there has always been another point of view, another way of recording social reality. In *The Sacred and the Feminine* Kathryn A. Rabuzzi laments that the same culture which views “Hemingway’s endless details about how to bait a fish-hook” as the constituent of high art has systematically considered fiction about women’s domestic life as trivial, sentimental, and even subliterate (93-94).

Just as few women find the quest motif, with its emphasis on separation from family and community, on individual achievement and journeying into the unknown, as an adequate pattern for their lives, few American women writers adopt this motif as a paradigm for self-realization. Kristina Groover observes that “many women both perceive and speak of their lives as being part of a network of interdependent relationships, rather than a linear journey made alone. Similarly, feminist theologians have suggested that women’s spiritual development is expressed in terms of increased engagement with the everyday world, particularly in the realms of home and community, rather than in terms of increased separation”

(123-24). But even in those women's narratives where the lone journey is the central experience of female development, the plot seems to adopt a different configuration to that of male narratives. Janis Stout, in *Through the Window, out the Door*, maintains that journeys are "differently inflected" in the lives and the narratives of women. And one of the main differences resides in "the insistence with which journeys are linked to home bases, to houses in an inseparable dyad." Stout studies five twentieth-century American writers (Mary Austin, Willa Cather, Anne Tyler, Toni Morrison and Joan Didion) "for whom both elements in that dyad—home and venture, the private and the public—are powerfully and centrally important" (ix). These writers show, in distinct and varying degrees, "a concern with reorientation from the private sphere to the public, but also a concern with maintaining, in the process, both their personal and their fictive ties to private spaces identified with home and stable relationships. Each defines a space between home and some level of wider activity, between the submerged self and the defined self, between imprisonment and freedom" (xiii).

The contemporary southern writer Lee Smith, noted for her focus on the domestic and the family sphere, has repeatedly voiced her defense of traditional female subjects—rituals, families, relationships—which are "as important as slogging through some battle. [...] As important as some traditionally male thing" (Dorothy Hill, "Interview" 16). In an interview with Virginia Smith, Lee Smith says that she has always been "really interested in this notion of women's creativity as being quite different from men's. It is not public; it's so rarely public," and relates this to "my early fascination as a girl with Virginia Woolf, who talks a lot about women artists. You know, Mrs. Ramsey and the perfect dinner party" (786).

There are indeed many who assert that women tend to write about the restricted worlds of homes and communities. However, the description of these restricted spaces in fact often reflects the political. Most southern women writers do limit their fiction to the level of the family, to the spaces they are familiar with: small towns and rural places in a rapidly changing South, intimate spaces such as houses, with their kitchens and living rooms. This limitation, though, is more apparent than real, since the wider issues of gender, race and class are, especially in a traditional society like the South, manifested precisely in the sphere of the family and the individual. In *A Southern Renaissance* Richard King excludes women writers from his study, with the exception of Lillian Smith, because they "were not concerned primarily with the large cultural, racial, and political themes that I take as my

focus” (8). In a forceful refutation of the idea that southern women writers do not deal with large social issues, Patricia Yaeger argues that the workings of history are felt in the particular, where the horror of fascism and racism lives on. Women writers like Eudora Welty give us “politics of a different order from the male writers of the Southern Renaissance, but [...] politics all the same” (303). Private narrative forms (stories, cookbooks, girlish fantasies, and personal vignettes) “can become sites for measuring a political crisis in the making” and “have public dimensions implicated in the apportionment of power” (304). The home and family setting is often the best means of reflecting the social dimension of human conflict. The home is the stage on which the players are revealed and examined in both the most social and the most private moments of their lives, these sometimes occurring simultaneously.

The institution of the family has traditionally been central to southern society, and the idea of the home is prevalent in the fiction of twentieth-century southern women. In their fiction home is a measure of social change and of the changes in the role and the self-perception of women. Redefinitions of the home are part of the larger web of relations between genders, races, classes and regions. It is in the home that women writers perceive and explore the new, emergent designs of their culture. The fictional women created by these writers—often replicas of themselves—must find new ways of evolving alongside the concepts and definitions of home that are changing all around them. In the present study I aim to analyze the pattern of duality and ambivalence which appears in the portrayal of domestic space by southern women writers since the 1890s. On the one hand we find the notion of home and the domestic as barren territory, a suffocating prison that generates only anxiety, a restricted space of silence, repression and the denial to women of a self-determined existence. Thus do many writers and critics emphasize the oppressive nature of domesticity to southern women, seeing housekeeping as the vehicle by which patriarchy maintains its controlling grip. The home can give the individual an alienating illusion of safety and coherence based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression, even the repression of differences within the self. Others, conversely, have seen home as the place of action and of self-affirmation, as the haven of nurture, as a “site of resistance” (bell hooks) grounded in strong familial ties, liberating rituals and communities of women. They posit a fusion of the domesticated, ritualized space of home, gardens, etc. with women’s creative, empowering connection to the land. They view

housekeeping as the vehicle of a culture invented by women, and consider domestic ritual as a language of preservation and celebration, as an art in which unknown tongues find expression.

Serious literature does not seek to offer Manichaeian versions of reality. Rather, it strives to give expression to the complex, multifaceted nature of the world. Gail Collins maintains that the center of the story of American women “is the tension between the yearning to create a home and the urge to get out of it” (xiii). Home and the domestic are most often portrayed as both restrictive and liberating, as something that both oppresses and expresses women. Not even the most fervid defenders of the sweet and nourishing homeplace ignore its shadowy corners and dark closets. Most often, these two conflicting aspects of domesticity coexist in a dialectical relationship within a work of fiction, are seen in the same fictive character, in the same domestic space. In the opening chapter, below, I discuss some theories relating to the relationship between the individual and domestic space, and to the categories of gender and space, drawing on phenomenological as well as literary and sociological studies. That is followed by an analysis of women and the domestic in the cultural and the literary tradition of the American South. Thus I hope to set out a theoretical, historical and contextual foundation, a flexible but reasonably secure one, on which to base the study of individual authors and works.

Chapter One

Theories and Contexts

Home is a good place to begin. Whether it is a tenement, a barrio, a ghetto, a neighborhood, the project, the block, the stoop, the backyard, the tenant farm, the corner, four walls, or hallowed ground, finding a place in the world where one can be *at home* is crucial. Home is literal: a place where you struggle together to survive; or a dream: “a real home,” something just out of one’s grasp, or a nightmare: a place to escape in order to survive as an individual. Home is an idea: an inner geography where the ache to belong finally quits, where there is no sense of “otherness,” where there is, at last, a community.

Janet Zandy 1

In Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, Madame Merle, a character with extensive experience of the world and its ways, instructs a still innocent Isabel Archer that what we call our “self” is something that “overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again,” that “[o]ne’s self—for other people—is one’s expression of one’s self; and one’s house, one’s furniture, [...] these things are all expressive” (175). In the modern era home has become one of the most powerful sources of identity. It is generally taken for granted that where and how we live determines and expresses our social position, that home is a central element in our socialization in the world, as well as an important site of ideological meaning. Current debate over the definitions of home suggests that no single, fixed concept exists, that home is not the static “safe place” that remains unchanged by shifts in time and space, and by new configurations of culture and ideology. The concept of home, like that of identity, is a fertile and protean site of contradictions that requires constant renegotiation and reconsideration. We live in times characterized by brutal displacements, by the constant rise of new nations from the disintegration of old political structures, and the idea of home as a point of

origin, as a safe haven to return to, becomes more and more attractive, yet paradoxically ever more difficult to attain (Wiley and Barnes xv).

Yi-Fu Tuan, in a discussion of architectural achievement, maintains that awareness is the factor that singles out humans as superior to other animals (*Space and Place* 102). Philosophers such as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Bachelard have suggested that our relation to places consists in dwelling, and that dwelling constitutes the basic principle of human existence. From the perspective of phenomenology, the house, which affords us refuge as well as representing our need to be situated, is considered to be the central place of human existence (Norberg-Schulz, *Existence* 31). The house is the place where the child begins to understand his relationship with the world, the place from which the individual departs and to which he returns. For Bachelard the house is one of the truly great integrative forces in the life of the individual:

I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. The binding principle in this integration is the daydream. Past, present and future give the house different dynamisms, which often interfere, at times opposing, at others, stimulating one another. In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. (6-7)

For Norberg-Schulz the basic property of man-made places is concentration and enclosure, the space shedding its purely physical quality and acquiring an existential dimension (*Genius Loci* 10). Indeed, the interdependence of identity and location is so strong that psychologists speak of a situational personality (Pallasmaa 137). For some the home is the realm of our private personality, the place where we hide our secrets and express our private selves, in contrast to the world outside, which is the stage for our social personality. If we accept the premise that both home and identity are culturally and socially constructed symbolic objects, the mutual relevance of housing for identity, and of identity for housing, becomes clear. By learning and absorbing the meanings of dwellings, the individual can use dwellings to create a sense of identity. He draws on the socially constructed meanings of dwellings to locate himself in reality and to define his self-image. On the other hand, once he is in possession of a sense of identity, the individual can use, and to some extent cultivate, the meanings of dwelling to display and communicate identity to both himself and to others. As Hummon says, “dwellings and their furnishings can, under certain conditions, speak worlds of

meaning, meanings that can be used to discover, present, and maintain identity” (210). Choosing one’s home and home-making are important means of personal expression and development, and we like to believe that the environment we create is a reflection of our selves. Clare Marcus claims that when we choose a place we are motivated not only by the price, the location or the style, “but also by the symbolic role of the house as an expression of the social identity we wish to communicate. We have become more self-conscious about home as a vehicle for communication and display.” Whether we are conscious of it or not, throughout our lives “our home and its contents are very potent statements about who we are” (12). In contemporary America there is a pronounced personalization of the domestic environment, with a strong emphasis on the house as a medium of self-expression, as an indication of one’s identity as a unique person. If individual identity shapes the home, the opposite is also true. In the words of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, “[l]ike some strange race of cultural gastropods, people build homes out of their own essence, shells to shelter their personality. But, then, these symbolic projections react on their creators, in turn shaping the selves they are” (138).

Although the American real estate sector has done its best to conflate the concepts of “house” and “home,” there are various complex mental states for which the word “home” is more appropriate than “house.” If home = house + x, what is the x that makes a home more than a house? The home fills various social and psychological needs: it is the place of self-expression, it provides a feeling of security, it is the physical framework considered most appropriate for the family, and it is generally thought to be the only area of control for the individual. And thus when a house acquires these unique psychological and social meanings does it turn into a home (Rapoport 30). Hayward identifies nine attributes of home in order of appearance: 1) as a set of relationships with others; 2) as a relationship with the wider social group and community; 3) as a statement about one’s self-image and self-identity; 4) as a place of privacy and refuge; 5) as a continuous and stable relationship with other sources of meaning about the home; 6) as a personalized place; 7) as a base of activity; 8) as a relationship with one’s parents and place of upbringing; 9) as a relationship with a physical structure, setting or shelter (in Rapoport 34). Bulos and Chaker find a degree of consistency in the way people of different gender, class and age talk about and describe their homes. The factors most often identified and repeated as constituting the essence of home are: privacy,

comfort, happiness, calm, family, and possessions (232). This notion of psychology and sociology that we call “home” is, then, much more than an object or a building. It is a diffuse and complex condition which integrates memories, images, desires, fears, the past and the present. A home is also a composite of rituals, of personal rhythms and the routines of everyday living. A home is not an instant product, it has a notorious time dimension—it is a continuum, the gradual product of the dweller’s adaptation to the world (Pallasmaa 133).

The word “home” carries a great deal of emotional meaning. It is deeply related to memories of childhood and the roots of our being, to notions of privacy, freedom and security. As a concept, home encapsulates order and identity. According to Dovey, “[t]o be at home is to know where you are; it means to inhabit a secure center and to be oriented in space” (36; qtd. in Pearson and Richards 6). Kevin Lynch argues that “a good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security” (4; qtd. in Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci* 19). The terror of being lost comes from the need of a mobile organism to be securely oriented in its surroundings. Being lost is, then, the polar opposite of the feelings of security and groundedness which home engenders in us. Above all, dwelling presupposes identification with the environment, and true belonging presupposes that the two psychological functions of “orientation” and “identification” are fully developed.¹ In the modern era true dwelling, in a psychological sense, has been substituted by alienation, as a result of the gradual demise of identification with physical place (Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci* 20-21).

Tuan and others have spoken of the interdependence of “home” and “journey.” In order to truly live, the individual has to take risks in alien places. The unavoidable journey, a travail, serves to define “home,” the meaning of which derives wholly from the journey, which removes one from the precincts of the home: “an argument in favor of travel is that it increases awareness, not of exotic places, but of home as a place” (“Space and Place” 235). Most often, travel to a new, unknown place gives us a new perspective on home and a new appreciation of it. In *The Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot wrote: “We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time” (59). Thus does Eliot give expression to the tension and

¹ Norberg-Schulz explains: “To gain an existential foothold man has to be able to *orientate* himself; he has to know *where* he is. But he also has to *identify* himself with the environment, that is, he has to know *how* he is a certain place” (*Genius Loci* 19).

inner conflict of human existence, which is both individual and social, the tension between order and freedom, between sedentariness and mobility. People want to make homes and also to leave them. As Eliot says, “[h]ome is where one starts from” (31). Humans by their very nature are involved in a constant journey of discovery. Every culture has its myths of the hero(ine)’s journey, indispensable to avoid stagnation and frustration. Many believe that when we travel we are looking for a “self” which is in fact not “out there” but inside us, and which both reveals and reshapes itself through the experiences of life. In our daily lives we are always and never leaving home, in a cycle of leaving and returning that repeats itself every day. Leaving one home to move to another, either by choice or necessity, can be both a loss and an opportunity for growth. Leaving and staying are necessary and complementary poles, with their respective connotations of risk and security, movement and stasis, need for expansion and feelings of comfort. By never leaving home we may avoid risks, but this implies also a refusal to grow, itself disempowering, a reluctance to restructure our lives through change, through unpredictable and thrilling experiences. By contrast, to be continually leaving home is for some a symptom of escape from aspects of self, of unresolved emotional conflicts, even a denial, perhaps, of self.

The domicentric view is so firmly established that it is able to exert social pressure on behavior. Thus are vagrants and gypsies frequently condemned, or at least viewed with suspicion. It has long been a commonplace to talk of the tremendous psychological dangers of contemporary American mobility, the thesis of Vance Packard’s *A Nation of Strangers* (1972).² Yet mobility is one of the principal formative elements in the human experience. Mankind has always moved, and to be rooted is a characteristic of vegetables, not humans.³ Myths of home and homeplace are countered by those of the voyager, the adventurer, the mythic journey of quest and exploration that takes the explorer not reluctantly but eagerly into and through the world (Sopher 134). America itself, with its insistence on the idea of a constantly recreated new home—in fact, “a new Heaven and a new Earth”—, is another version of the myth, incorporating many elements from Christian mythology. Mircea Eliade suggests that “[t]he novelty which still

² Between twenty and thirty percent of Americans move each year and the average American moves fourteen times over a lifetime. Americans rarely stay in a house longer than five years (Tall 104; Sopher 136).

³ In fact, we often talk about humans as if they were plants or trees: “New Yorkers transplanted to California,” etc.

fascinates Americans today is a desire with religious underpinnings. In ‘novelty’ one hopes for a re-naissance, one seeks a new life” (268). The American Dream requires that you should own your home, but Americans rarely stay in a house longer than five years. Nothing is more typically American than the aim to change one’s life often, to renew oneself by beginning anew. To stay in one place for life is unambitious and unadventurous, a betrayal of American values, and the spatial behavior of Americans during the past two centuries has amply demonstrated the dialectical tension between the two myths. A century ago, when one American in five changed residences within a year (a statistic which is largely unchanged today) the plaque with the words “Home Sweet Home” was one of the most treasured domestic icons (Sopher 136). And in folk songs the tendency to romanticize home coexisted with the constant celebration of “moving on.” In literary works like *Walden*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* America created some of the most remarkable heroes of bourgeois modernity. These heroes leave the homes they no longer consider truly theirs and wander in search of a more suitable home, not in the cause of a future, multitudinous nation, but to accommodate their own multitudinous selves.

The American Dream requires that you own your home, and by the 1960s the single family home had become a reality for millions of middle-class Americans.⁴ Since the nineteenth century American culture has stressed the connection between domestic design and moral purpose. The family home, which became the retreat that offered protection from the instability of a transient and fluid society and from the cut-throat competitiveness of the business world, has long functioned as a central force of stability for Americans (Clark 238). Ownership of a single family home reflects the upward mobility that expresses the American Dream. It is the mark of stability and security in a world of constant change and the remedy that soothes the anxieties created by the instability of American capitalism. Owning a single family home, pictured by middle-class Americans as a peaceful antidote to the ravishing struggle for success in the outside world, has long promised a means of separating the private from the public dimension of one’s life.

Simone Weil pointed out the beneficial effects of attachment: “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. [...] A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of

⁴ See Clark 237 for the factors that made this possible.

the past and certain particular expectations for the future” (in Tall 107). Frequent dislocation can be psychologically damaging. There are many who contend that the loss of personal landmarks which embody the past, and the disintegration of communal patterns of identity, have profound personal and social consequences (Tall 104). Both popular and academic critics of modern society have maintained that modernity itself, with its increasing placelessness and geographic mobility, creates rootless individuals with a sense of identity diminished by the loss of a significant sense of home. Modernization does away with the social, cultural and material distinctiveness of places, be they regions, communities, neighborhoods, homes or even specific rooms. In a sense we might see the modern individual as moving from one place to another and always confronting placelessness within a homogeneous landscape of tract houses and McDonald’s restaurants, being tragically unable to develop an imagery of self based on place or a sense of belonging in a specific landscape, community or region. For some these arguments are overdrawn, excessively pessimistic, and are based on myth and nostalgia. It has been argued that the condition of “perpetual exile” is in fact an ethically healthy one, a necessary turning away from the short-sighted sentimentalities of nationalism, for example (Tall 107). In modern societies mobility is, for most, essential to personal and economic development, and Tuan notes that rootlessness goes hand in hand with those American ideals we tend to admire: social mobility and optimism about the future. He argues that “[t]o be tied to place is also to be bound to one’s station in life, with little hope of betterment. Space symbolizes hope; place, achievement and stability” (*Topophilia* 8). A fixed place can easily become a deadly trap, a confining space of oppression and misery, and it is often the privileged and the unadventurous who argue most strongly about the threat of mobility to established traditions, taking a healthy attachment to place and the past to extremes of rigid exclusivity and sentimentality. For the underprivileged and the adventurous, on the other hand, mobility offers a life-saving escape from crippling misery and routine, the possibility to elude oppressive inherited values and traditions.

In other traditions we find the aspiration to a balance between wandering and staying, underscored by the idea that a full life involves both venturing out and returning. In the allegorical world of mythic and religious journeys, the greater challenge of the journey is to return home, to share the benefits of one’s experience, to incorporate the journey into its place of origin and the project of the

self. This is the pattern that we will find in the analysis of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. If remaining in a single place can be imprisoning, compulsive wandering makes one a citizen of nowhere, a non-citizen. Perhaps the ideal is to have always "a *here* from which the world discloses itself, a *there* to which we can go" (Eric Dardel, in Tall 108-09), a rhythm which combines change and stability, present and past. There are those who actually advocate a new conception of "home" as a nomadic place, a fluid, unfinished place of variable historical and geographical boundaries, a point of intersection between self and other, between inside and outside, but which nevertheless provides well-being and belongingness (Cooperman 210). And neither is this idea truly new. It finds a resonance in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), in which Charlotte Perkins Gilman advocated an expansion of the sweet order of domesticity, writing that home "should be the recognized base and background of our lives; but those lives must be lived in their true arena, the world" (347).

Postmodern thought long ago rejected the view of (home)place as bounded, as a site of an elusive authenticity in possession of a singular, fixed and unproblematic identity. It is a conception of space and place which rejects stasis, which views the global as part of the local, the outside as part of the inside, and which challenges claims to internal histories and timeless identities. As Massey asserts, "[t]he identities of place are always unfixd, contested and multiple" (5). An essentialist conception of place carries the danger of an undue devotion to past traditions, of choosing the easy comfort of Being over the progressive project of Becoming. And the recourse to the homeplace as a source of coherence and authenticity to counteract the disorientation and the disruption caused by the compression of time and space is for many as fruitless as the notion of a coherent and stable personal identity. Although we go on experiencing some sense of a "place-called-home," the identity of a place, even the place called "home," is continuously being produced, and has always been open and provisional. In all probability, the past was no more static than is the present.

Women and Home

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the role of home changed dramatically, and new ways of thinking about the domestic were required. The social and cultural construction of the home as a "woman's place" is fairly recent.

It emerged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a product of the new urban industrial order. The rapid and drastic separation of paid employment and public life from the home, together with the separation of suburban middle-class life from the city that followed, transformed the middle-class home into a place devoted to privacy, domesticity, procreation and consumption, and all these domestic roles were assigned to women. They not only became consigned to the house, but also increasingly came to realize their identity through the practical and symbolic activities of home life (Hummon 215-16). The assigning of the woman to the home, one of the central institutions of the economy, highlighted her importance, but her lack of income meant that her situation within society was both powerless and precarious. In the new socio-economic order of industrial capitalism the home lost its function as the work-place, and concomitant to this its use as a symbol of status began to assume more prominence. The expansion of the middle class over the years contributed to the generalized use of the house as the family's major symbol of status and identity, a function which required serious dedication in terms of effort and money. The affluence that contributed to the expansion of the middle classes allowed more and more households to extend the role of the house itself beyond that of mere shelter, with the house becoming the medium for a series of far more expressive functions. As Bonnie Loyd writes:

Caring for the house-as-status-symbol requires time and attention. The interior of the house must be decorated, cleaned, rearranged and re-evaluated. The higher the family's income, the greater the housekeeping responsibilities. Women, who were left behind in the home after the Industrial Revolution, became the obvious candidates for the position of housekeeper. (181)

In the Victorian period, which saw the rise of the cult of female domesticity, home and work became separated, falling into two distinct and isolated spheres. It was then that the ideological distinction between private and public domains of action arose, with these categories assuming their prevailing gendered forms. Since then the home has become not just a physical entity but also a mental one, as well as a cultural symbol of roles. From the nineteenth century onwards the house and the family came to be considered as the moral counterforce to the ruthless individualism and cut-throat competitiveness of the new industrial society. Middle-class women ceased to be producers and became consumers, and the home, no longer a workplace, became for men an idealized refuge from work, with the

woman as moral guardian. Edna Pontellier, in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, is a clear example of the kind of woman consumer that the industrial economy needed, making her home into a museum full of objects whose function is to illustrate the social power of her husband. The private house at this time became identified as a place of sanctuary, peace and renewal in which the values of security, stability, nurture and cooperation could be maintained, away from the sordid realities of a rampant commercialism that threatened to consume the soul. The woman became a highly sentimentalized figure, endowed with the role of "the angel in the house."⁵ Through an endless cycle of housekeeping she derived a strength with which she could influence her husband. Excluded from the public arena and banished from economic productivity, the Victorian mother and wife assumed a spiritual role and the home became the altar at which she officiated. As Leslie Weisman explains,

For her, the home became both altar and prison, and her authority within it was exerted entirely by way of symbolism. For her husband, the home was indeed his "castle," a place in which his authority and rule were unquestioned, his control over family decisions absolute. Men were faced with the stress of an insecure job situation in which vast and impersonal corporations controlled their lives and livelihoods and success depended upon unpredictable market conditions, not personal skills. To escape the storms of a maturing but turbulent corporate capitalism they retreated to the snug harbor of the home. (87)

Nothing could be more erroneous than the notion that if men control public space, women consequently control domestic space. The home is the site of a male/female territorial dichotomy, both spatially and symbolically. Expressions like "a woman's place is in the home" or "a man's home is his castle"⁶ embody a

⁵ *The Angel in the House* is a best-selling long narrative poem by Coventry Patmore (1823-1896). It has four sections composed over a period of years: "The Betrothed" and "The Espousals" (1854), which eulogize his first wife; "Faithful for Ever" (1860); and "The Victories of Love" (1862), the four published together in 1863. Together they came to symbolize the Victorian feminine ideal, portraying women as passive and self-sacrificing, in contrast to the desire for achievement that motivated the lives of their menfolk.

⁶ Although this expression certainly conveys the message of the sanctity and inviolability of domestic space, it also suggests the idea of male authority and privilege within the home. The words "house" and "home" are heavily colored by a notion found in English case law that the Jacobean judge Sir Edward Coke enshrined in the dictum, "The house of everyman is to him as his castle and fortress, as well as his defence against injury and violence, as for his repose." The nineteenth-century legal historian Edward A. Freeman cheapened the phrase, reducing it to "the Englishman's house is his castle" (Rykwert 49). The metaphor that originally described a legal and political situation became a social description in the Victorian period.

complex set of deeply ingrained social relations in which men are the owners and rulers of the domestic environment, whereas women are confined to it and are charged with its maintenance. As Judith Flanders asserts, the hierarchy of authority was undisputed in the Victorian home: “God gave his authority to man, man ruled woman, and woman ruled the household, both children and servants, through the delegated authority she received from man” (xxx).⁷ Even in the domain of the home, the social and symbolic identification of women with home life, as opposed to the public sphere of industry and trade, became symbolically reproduced in the division of interior and exterior domestic space: the female was given charge of “interior decoration,” whereas the outside and more visible public space came to be regarded as the responsibility and reflection of the male. As Weisman observes, “[w]henver there is social inequality, be it between women and men, black and white, or servant and served, the design and use of public space, public buildings, and domestic architecture will reflect it. Those with greater social status will spatially exclude those with lesser social status; and when ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ groups do share space, they will not stand in the same relationship to it” (86). Although women have always retained control over the interior of the home, the design of the structure has been an area dominated by men. The man shapes the architecture, the architecture shapes the woman’s role as caretaker, and the family’s social and economic position shapes both (Loyd 191).

Women and men have for long been socialized to see their relationships to homes differently, and if men invest money in their homes, women invest their lives. If the home is undeniably an important status symbol for both men and women, for traditional housewives it can also become an intimate symbol of self (Weisman 114). For a woman, housing may provide a valuable source of meaning and self-realization, but at the same time it may divide and entrap her. Traditional gender identities forced women to adopt a sense of identity with respect to the home which differs from that of men, and hence women in traditional domestic environments are more likely than men to consider the home as a vehicle of self-expression and a reflection of self. Among women and men who identify with their

⁷ Flanders quotes an advice book on the topic of how to be better wives and mothers that reminded women that “[t]he most important person in the household is the head of the family—the father . . . Though he may, perhaps, spend less time at home than any other member of the family—though he has scarcely a voice in family affairs—though the whole household machinery seems to go on without the assistance of his management—still it does depend entirely on that active brain and those busy hands” (in Flanders xxx).

dwelling places, women tend to see the house and the treasured domestic objects as guarantees and symbols of family life, whereas men are more likely to interpret their attachment to houses in terms of work investment or as a mark of personal accomplishment (Hummon 216-17).

The greater involvement of women with the domestic would appear to generate greater emotional investment of self in this role. And this greater emotional involvement is likely to generate emotional conflict in women, particularly in a period in which they are confronted with significant changes in society and with new definitions of the roles and the identity of women. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), one of the most significant books for American women published during the 1960s, claimed that the failure of the expectations of peace and stability centered around the American single-family home was especially intense for women. Friedan argued convincingly that the process by which women were placed on a domestic pedestal and confined to the sacred precincts of the domestic constituted for them a negative rather than a positive form of power. Her argument implies that, to the extent that home is divinized for a man by the presence of a selfless, loving woman, it may well be demonized for a woman. The main components of the “feminine mystique” had emerged in American society by the early 1950s. Early marriage and large families had become fashionable after the privations and the economic depression of the war years, and the freestanding house had become the most cherished symbol of individual independence. In the age of anxiety brought on by the nuclear threat of the Cold War and the lack of belief in the individual’s capacity to influence society, the home became a haven and women were required to provide a soothing presence there (Matthews 209-10). The American home now became more apolitical than had been the case in the years before the war, and career women were seen as a threat to the social order in a period in which “women existed to please men rather than as beings in their own right who warranted comfort” (Matthews 210). Friedan’s book was seed that fell on fertile ground at a time when innumerable frustrated women faced the prospect of life in a system where their “normal” role was one of contented domesticity. The 1950s saw the consolidation of suburban America, which coincided with the massive growth of the highway system. The favorable conditions for purchasing homes, together with widespread car ownership, resulted in a suburban population of some 37 million by 1950, a figure that would almost double by 1970 (Matthews 212). The suburban housing pattern taxed the energies of the American wife, who

spent more and more time driving other family members around and tending to houses that kept getting larger and increasingly full of appliances that demanded her attention. The isolation of the suburban house deprived housewives of the necessary contact with the world of adults. Friedan became convinced that there was a radical disparity between the popular image of the suburban housewife, happy with her perfect husband and children plus the luxuries of the consumer culture, and the intolerable ennui of her private life. In her book, Friedan exposed the malaise of the American suburban housewife, “the strange, dissatisfied voice stirring within her” (21), and argued that “[i]t is no longer possible to ignore that voice, to dismiss the desperation of so many American women.” For Friedan, the problem that stirred the minds of so many American women held the key to the future of the United States as a nation and a culture, and she warned against ignoring “that voice within women that says, ‘I want something more than my husband and my children, and my home’” (27).

More recent studies have underlined the notion that living in the suburbs is perceived differently by men and women. Since the rise of industrial and commercial city centers in the mid-nineteenth century, the suburbs have in general been perceived as the site of domesticity, family values, security and femininity, whereas urban centers are perceived as more “masculine” and associated with competition, power-play, and danger. Clare Marcus describes a suburban scenario almost tailor-made to breed frustration and misunderstanding: “Men would traditionally return from the cut-and-thrust of the workplace, be thankful to put their feet up, sip a martini, relax from human interaction, and watch the evening news. Meanwhile, the woman, perhaps cooped up all day with infants or small children, couldn’t contain herself from recounting the activities of the day” (198). Contrary to the myth that propagates an intimate identification of the female with the home, it is in fact more often the commuting male adult who favors the move to the suburbs. It is he who is in need of returning home at the end of the day to enjoy the quiet privacy of the suburban household. This environment, however, does not easily satisfy the need felt by many women for social involvement, and women often prefer urban living or the atmosphere of older suburbs with street life and neighborhood shops. According to Gillis, “the move to the single-family house in the suburbs was initiated by men rather than women. For the latter, homemaking was a business best served by the city, with all its conveniences and amenities. But for men, for whom the home was refuge, these practical concerns were secondary”

(115). This is all part of a long history of the limitation of women's mobility, not only in terms of space but also of identity, which in so many cultural contexts has been a crucial vehicle of subordination. The limitation of mobility in space, the confinement to specific, gendered places, and the limitation of identity have always been intricately related. Massey asserts that "[o]ne of the most evident aspects of this joint control of spatiality and identity has been in the West related to the culturally specific distinction between public and private. The attempt to confine women to the domestic sphere was both a specifically spatial control and, through that, a social control on identity" (179). The mobility of women has always been felt to be a threat to the patriarchal order, and the masculine desire to fix woman in the stable identity of "angel in the house" may be related to the desire to fix her in space, to keep her from moving on, in terms of both place and identity.

Frequently the characterization of home as the most real and authentic place comes from those who have left it. And, as in Elizabeth Spencer's story "First Dark," the one who has left is often the male, who builds his identity by discovering and changing the world, while the female stays behind and personifies a place which he likes to see as a source of stability and authenticity. The association of woman with the home and the values that our culture has placed on it is a means of exerting spatial control through the power of convention and symbolism. When that is not enough, the threat of violence is a drastic, yet frequently used, alternative.

The Home Plot

In recent years we have witnessed a vindication of the study of the "home plot" on the part of feminist scholars, and a shift of attention to the domestic as the expression of a complex and peculiarly female culture. In their Introduction to *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Politics and Poetics of Home*, Catherine Wiley and Fiona Barnes contend that "the recent emphasis on outsiderhood and otherness in women's lives and women's writing must ultimately give way to a renewed focus on selfhood and homemaking. Reconstruction should follow deconstruction, as women work to remake—and rewrite—themselves by privileging community and connection over separation and dislocation" (xvi). Indeed, Romines, Levy, Cooperman and Grover are just some of the feminist critics who took a serious, sustained and sympathetic interest in the home. They