OUR HOUSE
The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture
Edited by Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft

NATURE, CULTURE AND LITERATURE
02
Our House
Nature, Culture and Literature
02

General Editors:
Hubert van den Berg (University of Groningen)
Axel Goodbody (University of Bath)
Marcel Wissenburg (University of Nijmegen)

Advisory Board:
Jonathan Bate (University of Warwick)
Hartmut Böhme (Humboldt University, Berlin)
Heinrich Detering (University of Kiel)
Andrew Dobson (Open University)
Marius de Geus (Leiden University)
Terry Gifford (University of Leeds)
Demetri Kantarelis (Assumption College, Worcester MA)
Richard Kerridge (Bath Spa University College)
Michiel Korthals (Wageningen University)
Svend Erik Larsen (University of Aarhus)
Patrick Murphy (University of Central Florida)
Kate Rigby (Monash University)
Avner de-Shalit (Hebrew University Jerusalem)
Piers Stephens (University of Liverpool)
Nina Witoszek (University of Oslo)
CONTENTS

Acknowledgements 7

Contributors 8

Introduction: Culture and Domestic Space 11
_Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft_

1 Houses, Habit and Memory 27
_Joe Moran_

2 ‘You understand what domestic architecture ought to be, you do’: Finding Home in _The Wind in the Willows_ 43
_Gerry Smyth_

3 The Life of a Country Cottage 63
_Karen Sayer_

4 Labouring at Leisure: Aspects of Lifestyle and the Rise of Home Improvement 85
_Ruth McElroy_

5 Safe House: Authenticity, Nostalgia and the Irish House 103
_Shane Alcobia-Murphy_

6 ‘The house … has cancer’: Representations of Domestic Space in the Poetry of Carol Ann Duffy 121
_Mari Hughes-Edwards_
7  Building, Dwelling, Moving: Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin and the Reverse Aesthetic
   Scott Brewster

8  Troubled Places: Domestic Space in Graphic Novels
   Jeff Adams

9  Householders: Community, Violence and Resistance in Three Contemporary Women’s Texts
   Peter Childs

10 Sonic Architecture: Home Hi-fi and Stereo(types)
    Ron Moy

11 A Life of Longing Behind the Bedroom Door: Adolescent Space and the Makings of Private Identity
    Jo Croft

12 One Widower’s Home: Excavating Some Disturbed Meanings of Domestic Space
    Joseph Boughey

References  247

Index  263
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the contributors for being so patient waiting for this volume to be produced. Our thanks also go to all the people who offered help and advice throughout this project: Nancy Duncan, Axel Goodbody, Wendy Hyde, Richard Kerridge, Nickianne Moody, Helen Rogers, Marieke Schilling, David Sorfa, Mike Storry, Ric Tyson, Roger Webster, and the members of the Department of English Literature and Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University. Our thanks to Joe Moran and to Jeff Adams for help with the technical aspects of the MS. Finally, we thank all the friends, family and colleagues with whom we shared ideas about the representation of domestic space.

We dedicate this book to our families.

Jo Croft and Gerry Smyth
CONTRIBUTORS

Jeff Adams is a lecturer in Education in the Department of Educational Studies at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His research interests include documentary comics and graphic novels, contemporary art in education, web-based learning and the professional development of art teachers.

Shane Alcobia-Murphy is a lecturer at the School of Language and Literature at the University of Aberdeen. His main research interests lie in twentieth-century Irish writing and visual arts. He has published articles on Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, Willie Doherty, Paul Muldoon and Medbh McGuckian. Two monographs - *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool University Press) and *Governing the Tongue: Essays on Northern Irish Culture* (Cambridge Scholars Press) - are forthcoming.

Joseph Boughey has been a Senior Lecturer in the School of the Built Environment at Liverpool John Moores University since 1990. His research interests include the history of British inland waterways history, the politics of landscape and heritage, environmental valuation and, increasingly, the relations between grief, loss and environments. He has been a widower since March 2002.

Scott Brewster is Lecturer in Twentieth-Century Literature and Culture at the University of Salford. He co-edited *Ireland in Proximity: History, Gender, Space* (1999) and *Inhuman Reflections: Thinking the Limits of the Human* (2000). He has written essays on Irish poetry and fiction, the Gothic, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. He is currently writing *Lyric* for the Routledge *Critical Idiom* series.
Peter Childs is Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Gloucestershire. He has written extensively on twentieth-century fiction and has recently published a book on contemporary fiction with Palgrave.

Jo Croft is Senior Lecturer in English at Liverpool John Moores University. Her research interests include adolescence, children’s literature and psychoanalysis.

Mari Hughes-Edwards is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at Edge Hill University College. Recent publications include an edited collection of essays on medieval women religious entitled Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs (University of Wales Press, 2005), articles on sexuality and space in the poetry of Lee Harwood, and also on medieval asceticism and the medieval body in pain. She is about to submit an extensive monograph on medieval anchoritism for publication in 2006 / 07.

Ruth McElroy is Senior Lecturer in Media and Cultural Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. Her research centres upon the imaginative purchase of home upon producers and consumers of literary and visual texts. She is currently working on a cultural history of DIY, as well as a comparative analysis of lifestyle television across Britain, Wales and the USA. She is the author of several journal articles and in August 2002, guest edited a special issue of the European Journal of Cultural Studies, entitled Sexing the Nation: The Spaces of Belonging(s).

Joe Moran is Reader in Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University. He is the author of Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America (2000) and Interdisciplinarity (2002). He is currently writing a book for Routledge entitled Reading the Everyday. He lives in a redbrick, by-law terraced house, built in 1902.

Ron Moy is Senior Lecturer in Popular Music Studies at Liverpool John Moores University. His research interests include popular music genres and sonic architecture in the domestic environment.
Karen Sayer is Senior Lecturer in History at Leeds, Trinity and All Saints. She has published extensively on constructions of rurality as linked to gender. Her second monograph, *Country Cottages: A Cultural History*, was published in 2000 with Manchester University Press.

Gerry Smyth is Reader in Cultural History at Liverpool John Moores University. He has published widely on different aspects of Irish cultural history. His books include *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (1997) and *Space and the Irish Cultural Imagination* (2002), and *Noisy Island: A Short History of Irish Popular Music* (2005).
Introduction:  
Culture and Domestic Space  

Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft  

I
In one of those coincidences with which we are all familiar (but which no one – and certainly no ‘professional’ academic – likes to speak about too much), the editors of this book happened to move house within a two-week period of each other around about the end of April 2004. One consequence of this was that matters which had exercised them at an abstract theoretical level during the early stages of the editorial process for this book now began to impact upon their ‘real’ lives. Academic analysis of the ‘meaning’ of domestic space suddenly became a little … well, academic, as the various physical, emotional and administrative ordeals which are part and parcel of moving house in contemporary Britain came (so to speak) home to roost with a vengeance.

What were the chances of two people moving house during a period in which they were editing a book about houses? Pretty good, it seems. In Britain, we live and breathe houses: we talk about them all the time; we watch television programmes about them; we read magazines about them; we spend large amounts of money buying and doing them up; some of us even self-consciously try to ignore them, thereby confirming the absolute centrality of the house to the culture at large. Once you start looking – as we did when we began thinking seriously about the scope of this collection – images of the house appear everywhere, bearing upon contemporary life in a great variety of ways.

For scholars working in the general area of the humanities, writing about the meaning of domestic space is not the same as writing about the development of the novel, or the evolution of classic cinematic narrative, or the emergence of a modernist avant-garde in the fine arts.
These issues touch our lives (and the lives of our intended readers – students, colleagues, or whomever) at various points; we like them, we’re interested in them, we can become ‘experts’ to a greater or lesser degree with regard to their histories and their characteristics. No matter the extent to which they bear upon our lives, however, such issues are generally removed from our day-to-day experience of the world. The relationship between Cathy and Heathcliff can tell us a good deal about gender discourses in the mid-nineteenth century, and it would be an interesting and useful exercise to track the progress of such discourses into the present. Some might even like to consider their own relationships in the light of these fictional characters (although we would not recommend this).

The house, though, is something else again. Everyone in our reading constituency will have had experience of ‘the house’ – the latter being a handy catch-all term for any constructed place of dwelling in which people conduct the multitude of activities encompassed by the verb ‘to live’. We may or may not wish to die for love; none of us may feel as centred or as capable as a Hollywood hero; some may even wish to stop making sense in conventional bourgeois terms. All of us, however, know what it is to step over a threshold separating ‘outside’ from ‘inside’; most of us will be aware that ‘stuff’ – paint, furniture and ornaments, for example – can change the atmosphere of a house in certain ways; many will have felt conflicting emotions in relation to the building or buildings in which they grew up. Put simply, the house is an absolutely fundamental part of our lives.

The current British vogue for all things to do with the house should be placed in the context of post-war changes in the meaning and function of domestic space within society at large (Langhamer 2005). Whilst acknowledging this, however, it behoves us to recognize that there is something primordial about the house – something elemental hovering just below surface concerns with changing usage patterns and gender roles and socio-economic factors. Houses function as a particular form of ‘the built environment’ – a form that has existed since the first hominid lashed two ferns together with a third to provide some basic shelter from the elements. No doubt our far distant ancestors used natural physical features (trees and caves, for example) to avoid certain weather conditions (rain or sun, for example) since time immemorial, and as a species we have continued to do so throughout our history in certain circumstances. But by modifying the
natural environment for such specific ends that ur-architect (let’s call him Al) took a leap forward for the species as significant in its way as the evolution of the prehensile thumb, the control of fire, or the ability to speak.

Although protection from the elements would remain its primary function, it could not have been too long before the dwelling (in however basic or temporary a form) became an arena for more complex human practices. At this point, someone (let’s call her Anna) must have given a thought as to the best use of the available materials in the construction of a suitable edifice, as well as to the best use of the available space to reflect the desires and the fears of the occupants. Thus was born the idea of the house as something in excess of its primary function as artificial shelter – as a place, in fact, which expressed something of the identity of the builder or owner or occupier, as well as something of the culture of the society in which it was built.

The history of the house is the history of the dialectic that emerges between these two impulses: shelter and identity, Al and Anna. As befitting his ‘hard’ masculine disciplinary status, the former connotes a science, a history, a sociology and a philosophy of architecture. This is a discourse with which the essays in this book do not, for the most part, pretend to engage. The latter, however, connotes a dimension of human experience which as it turns out has always haunted the humanities, but which has been systematically disregarded or trivialised – not by the cultural agents themselves but by the critical community that services cultural discourse. This is a key point: even a cursory glance over any of the fields engaged by the contributors to this volume reveals a deep pre-occupation on the part of artists and cultural agents with the question of dwelling and with the impact of the house upon human experience. Critics, however, have by and large been reluctant to expend their valuable time and energy on anything so quotidian as ‘a house’, unless it is an obviously ‘important’ or ‘glamorous’ prospect such as Howards End or Satis House or Brideshead or Wuthering Heights itself. It would seem as if the very ubiquity of domestic space as a feature within so many art forms has militated against its serious critical engagement.

II

The scholarly consideration of domestic space represents a Pandora’s Box of theories, methodologies, disciplines, institutions and interven-
tions – a veritable industry, in fact, which the present editors weren’t quite totally ignorant of when setting out upon this project. The genesis of our present interest in house and home, however, lies in a chance encounter with *The Poetics of Space* by Gaston Bachelard during a library browsing session. With its conjoining of the humanistic and the scientific, the soft and the hard, the intriguing title alone was enough to draw the attention of anyone with an interdisciplinary curiosity. Each of the main terms, in fact, contains ambivalent traces of both scientific and humanistic discourses. ‘Poetics’ alludes etymologically to ‘poetry’ – a word and a concept that has regularly been identified as a ‘blue sky’ discipline in institutional terms; at the same time, ‘poetics’ appears to promise a ‘scientific’ formalism which has traditionally been cast against effete humanist responses to the cultural text. ‘Space’ is likewise overlain with an assortment of disciplinary resonances – as reflected, for example, in the term’s invocation by the great range of geographical and architectural subdisciplines. All in all, as a phrase ‘the poetics of space’ retains a potential significance for just about everybody with an academic interest in domestic space. It should come as no surprise that, given the range of those disciplinary interests, the book has exasperated just as many as it has charmed since its first publication.

As part of our concern to ensure the volume’s thematic consistency, we directed all the contributors towards Bachelard’s classic work. As the essays came in, however, it became increasingly clear that the invitation to ‘engage’ had been robustly enjoined, and that Bachelard himself had not done so well out of the various encounters. That is, of course, entirely as it should be; as a reflection of the democratic ideal which forms the historical basis of this particular critical genre, *Our House* comprises a series of ‘essays’ (from the French ‘to try’) on a delimited issue – in this case: domestic space. How individuals approach that issue, and what they make of it, was (beyond adhering to certain scholarly standards) up to them. It came as little surprise, therefore, to encounter a wide range of responses to Bachelard’s work; and thus, while some researchers discovered a well of ideas leading to all sorts of insights and possibilities, others found ahistorical blindspots and oversights and insupportable claims. Perhaps the main point that emerges from the essays collected here is the socio-political specificity of Bachelard’s model of domestic space,
and the dangers of extrapolating general theories from singular phenomena.

If Bachelard is the great modern philosopher of ‘the house’, Martin Heidegger performs a similar function with regard to the related concept of ‘the home’, and he was the second figure with whose work we invited contributors to engage. Heidegger enjoys (if that’s the term) a reputation as a thinker of intimidating depth and complexity, and it would be a brave editor indeed who tried to summarise the thought of this imposing figure in a few paragraphs. Here, it’s enough to signal that Heidegger’s philosophical concerns with the nature of being, consciousness and reality led him towards an interest in space and place – more specifically, to an interest in ‘the house’ as both physical location (‘dwelling’, signifying a building) and concept (‘dwelling’, signifying home) wherein these concerns became manifest. Put as simply as possible, Heidegger argued that consciousness (and the culture produced in specific historical moments of consciousness) is caught between opposing tendencies towards home, or being ‘homed’, and homelessness. The former represents a condition in which humankind is at one with itself, balanced between the earth and the sky, between physicality and spirituality; ‘homelessness’, on the other hand, describes the alienation of that balance, an estrangement of body and spirit brought on by (amongst other things) the species’ energy for technological evolution. Heidegger’s suspicion that modern consciousness was particularly susceptible to alienation, to existential homelessness, led him to espouse a romantic attachment to home and homeland which flirted dangerously with the principal political philosophy of his own time and place: fascism. Nonetheless, his conviction that authentic art must needs be grounded in the actual or metaphorical space of ‘the home’ has proved enduringly influential.

Variations on the thought of both Heidegger and Bachelard (and indeed of many other figures) pop up throughout the essays in this volume. Indeed, reading with a mind sensitised to the imagery of domestic space, it becomes increasingly apparent how thoroughly such imagery has penetrated modern consciousness and culture – how frequently it features as a metaphor in a variety of philosophical and aesthetic systems, and how ubiquitous it is as an element within narrative, irrespective of derivation or context. The idea of the house, as we averred at the outset, is every-where; and not only in popular culture (that myriad of British reality television programmes that emerged
during the 1990s, for example) but as one of our most fundamental responses to the situation in which we find ourselves: self-aware organisms dependent upon some form of shelter to ensure survival.

A corollary of this is the realisation that all cultural space – indoors and outdoors, built and ‘natural’ – is a function to a greater or lesser degree of the human response to its own evolving condition. Space, as J. Hillis Miller puts it, is made meaningful ‘by the living that takes place within it. This transforms it both materially, as by names, or spiritually, as by the ascription of some collective value to this or that spot’ (1995: 21). This is not to subscribe to some form of philosophical idealism, however, as if space possessed no material reality outside the human imagination. Rather, the space enables the response, which in turn creates the space – as Hillis Miller goes on to say: ‘Causer and caused, first and second, change places in a perpetually reversing metalepsis’ (21). Put in the terms introduced above, Al and Anna appear to be locked together in an embrace which is always part struggle and part support – at once both a fight and a dance – for even as they vie for dominance, there is an implicit realisation that the one cannot exist without the other.

Space, then, is the discursive arena wherein the battle for subjectivity has been played out in a great variety of discourses (nature versus nurture, fear versus desire, will versus fate, and so on) since time immemorial. And to return to our original point – the one which was the motivation for Our House – within the ‘space’ of space, so to speak, it’s our conviction that the house represents a peculiarly privileged location for the enactment of the human drama.

III
From Exodus to Evergreen Terrace, from Pemberley to Poe, the slightest glance reveals both the ubiquity and the centrality of the house as an image within human culture. The fact is that modern cultural history is saturated with representations of domestic space; and before launching into the collection proper it might be worthwhile taking a moment to remind ourselves of some of the forms taken by such representations, as well as the range of concerns and issues which tend to underpin them.

Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations (1861) provides as good an example as one could find of the centrality of domestic space to the canon of world literature. The novel has traditionally been character-
ised as a proto-modernist *bildungsroman*: the hero Pip wishes to be a ‘gentleman’, and the narrative tracks the development of his character in relation to the various contemporary discourses vying to define that term. The text could just as easily be defined, however, as Pip’s search for a ‘home’ amongst all the houses he encounters throughout the narrative. In this sense it’s ironic that the closest he will come to feeling ‘at home’ is in the forge which adjoins the wooden house where he lives with his shrewish sister and her ‘gentle’ husband, the blacksmith Joe Gargery. The house itself is a place of physical pain and emotional restraint, offering nothing of the nurture (beyond accommodation and sustenance) traditionally associated with the domestic dwelling. The forge, on the other hand, though not a ‘house’ in any accepted sense of the term is a place of sanctuary where Pip and Joe, although lacking blood ties, ‘forge’ a bond of love and commitment that Pip will spend the remainder of the novel coming to understand.

Pip’s quest to become a gentleman is triggered in the first instance by his contact with Satis House – the crumbling pile occupied by Miss Havisham and her protégée Estella. Satis joins a long list of famous houses (both before and since) which have featured in a variety of national literary traditions (many of them alluded to above and throughout the remainder of this volume). Miss Havisham is an anomaly: a living ghost, her emotional life permanently frozen at that precise moment (her wedding morning) when her public ‘life’ ended so spectacularly. She ‘haunts’ Satis, refusing to allow time to perform its natural function, and poisoning Estella’s mind against those emotions – hope, love, empathy – which invest the domestic stage with so much of its resonance and power. Satis is truly a ‘house of horror’ – not in the supernatural sense that would in aftertimes come to dominate representations of the gothic mansion, but in the desperately human sense in which all our aspirations appear doomed to end in disappointment, regret and madness.

Opposed to the emotionally bankrupt space of Satis House (and paralleling the forge as a positive representation of domestic architecture) is the suburban London house occupied by one of Pip’s friends, Mr Wemmick (a solicitor’s clerk) and his ‘aged parent’. Pip describes his first visit to the neighbourhood and to the edifice itself:

> It appeared to be a collection of back lanes, ditches, and little gardens, and to present the aspect of a rather dull retirement. Wemmick’s house was a little wooden cottage in the midst of plots of garden, and the top of it was cut out and
Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft

painted like a battery mounted with guns.

‘My own doing,’ said Wemmick. ‘Looks pretty; don’t it?’

I highly commended it. I think it was the smallest house I ever saw; with the queerest gothic windows (by far the greater part of them sham), and a gothic door, almost too small to get in at.

‘That’s a real flagstaff, you see,’ said Wemmick, ‘and on Sundays I run up a real flag. Then look here. After I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up, so – and cut off the communication.’

The bridge was a plank, and it crossed a chasm about four feet wide and two deep. But it was very pleasant to see the pride with which he hoisted it up, and made it fast; smiling as he did so, with a relish, and not merely mechanically.

‘At nine o’clock every night, Greenwich time,’ said Wemmick, ‘the gun fires. There he is, you see! And when you hear him go, I think you’ll say he’s a Stinger’ (Dickens 1974: 199).

The eccentric lengths to which Wemmick has gone in an effort to maintain the border between the house in Walworth where he lives and the outside world (including the city office in Little Britain Street where he works) is indicative of the enduring significance of the built environment in relation to identity. Despite his father’s age and various infirmities, despite its architectural limitations, Wemmick’s Walworth house is a place of life and love – everything, in fact, which Satis House is not. It offers Pip (and the reader) a crucial reminder of the complex interplay that subsists between material space and the experience of home – an understanding that his insistent pursuit of gentlemanliness has caused him to lose.

We alluded above to the ‘house of horror’: the enduring vogue for house-based ghost stories. As an example from the ‘popular’ end of the cultural spectrum, we find that the image of the haunted house forms a recurring motif within the genre of the horror film – as borne out, for example, in the plethora of horror franchises which have emerged in recent years: *Amityville, Evil Dead, Candyman, Last Summer, Jeepers Creepers, Scream, Jason, Chucky, Freddy*, and so on. This genre draws intertextually on various landmark texts in which domestic interiors of one sort or another form the indispensable backdrop for the developing horror – even in the relatively modern period consider films such as *Psycho* (1960), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Straw Dogs* (1973), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) (films which in some cases have gone on to achieve franchise status themselves).

Of course, this is not to deny the prevalence of the outdoors (most usually, the woods) as another favorite locus for popular horror – witness one of the most successful efforts of recent times: *The Blair*
Witch Project (1999). ‘Outdoors’ horror, if it may be so termed, draws on the threat of exposure to the unknown, the absence of a solid, familiar built environment (with its traces of benign human endeavour) as sanctuary against malign forces. With ‘indoors’ horror, those forces (supernatural or not) have entered the dwelling, infiltrating both the safe, recognisable spaces of childhood (the bedroom, the kitchen) as well as those spaces (the cellar, the attic, the locked room) about which we always had ambivalent feelings anyway. Indoors horror plays with the received idea of the house as sanctuary, subverting the archetype bequeathed to us by history. Just as night inheres within the idea of day, however, so darkness inheres within the idea of light; so, also, the horror narrative has always relied on a complex economy of exoticism and banality – the proximity, indeed, the domesticity, of malign forces: the bogeyman beneath the bed, the uncanny trace of otherness within the familiar. We find variations on this economy (and of the underlying indoors / outdoors dialectic) in many of the classic western folk tales – including Little Red Riding Hood, Hansel and Gretel, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs – tales which frequently serve as prototypes for modern cinematic horror.

The Others (Amenábar 2001) provides a good example of a modern horror film in which the house figures prominently. The action is set in a large gothic mansion on Jersey in 1945, where Grace (played by Hollywood A-lister Nicole Kidman) is waiting with two young children for her husband to return from the war. Conveniently enough, the house has to be kept in perpetual darkness owing to a rare disease which makes the boy and girl susceptible to sunlight. The stress caused by having to keep rooms constantly locked with curtains perpetually drawn, added to the fear over her husband’s fate and her own unreconstructed Catholicism, is clearly telling on Grace, as the film’s opening live action shot of her screaming herself awake make clear. The house itself, we soon see, is a classic gothic pile, complete with turrets, roman arches, portrait-bedecked corridors, and angular stairways leading to ominously locked rooms.

The plot commences with Grace taking on a new set of servants, having been abandoned, apparently, by the previous crew. Ghostly goings-on ensue; the daughter reports the presence of other people in the house – the ‘others’ of the title, as we are led to believe; the servants act suspiciously, dropping cryptic hints about the history of the building and the previous occupants; the house itself, meanwhile, is