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House and home in literature: Introductory remarks

The articles that comprise this volume illustrate a spectrum of literary representations of house and home: the architecture of the house, the house as a material inscription of national history (Topolovská), the house as a spatio-temporal entity preserving the past and connecting past and present (Kucała), home as a space of domestic discomfort (Piątek), home as a site of individual and collective identity (Dudek), the country and its geography as a hospitable or inhospitable homeland (Klonowska), the politics of the house, dwellings as exteriorisations of social and ethnic divisions (Klonowska, Jęczmińska).

Although highly selective, the list testifies to the enormous potential inherent in the relatively new academic field of housing studies. The primary distinction between the concepts of house and home alone has given rise to manifold types of research. As Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei explain, “Whereas the house is generally perceived to be a physical built dwelling for people in a fixed location, the home, although it may possess the material characteristics of a built dwelling, implies a space, a feeling, an idea, not necessarily located in a fixed place” (2012: 5). However, as these definitions imply, far from being clear-cut, the distinction also involves a significant overlap. For example, Witold Rybczynski’s well-known study *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (1986) is underpinned by the interdependence of house and home. Spanning the time from the Middle Ages until modernity, the author discusses types of domestic spaces, linking them not only to the material conditions of living typical of a given period in history, but also to social and familial relations and hierarchies, and to the ideas that shaped the domestic fashions, preferences and expectations of the age. House and home may be studied both synchronically and diachronically – while they are common to all human societies and have universal appeal, they are invariably “framed by time, place, and culture: the concreteness of geography and history” (Bukowczyk 2002: ix). In the words of Bożena Shallcross, “the discourse on the home is a truly cross-, inter-, and multidisciplinary entity that has evolved simultaneously from anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, architecture, and cultural studies” (2002: 2).

A seminal study by Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), is grounded in the dual perception of the house: on the one hand, it is an actual building, made of solid materials; on the other hand, it is also “an imaginary entity,” made up of memories and the shared past of its residents (Moran 2006: 28). The ideal house conjured up by Bachelard connotes the notions of shelter and protection. Departing from Bachelard’s oneiric model, Joe Moran points out that in practice houses have more to do with “the mundane and ongoing activities of daily life” (2006: 41). Therefore, he argues that the poetics of space should be supplanted by attention to its politics (2006: 42); as he insists, the notions of house and home are inevitably connected with “history, economics and politics” (Moran 2006: 27).

Although the house, in some measure, reflects its social environment, it also separates the public and the private, creating a space for individual identity and self-expression. Originally, human dwellings as “artificial shelters” served the basic need for separation and protection from the natural environment – a function which obviously remains crucial to the concept of the house (Smyth & Croft 2006: 13). The architecture of houses has practical, social as well as aesthetic value. From a philosophical perspective, home has been employed by Martin Heidegger as a metaphor to argue that being not-at-home is an intrinsic aspect of human alienation in the world (Smyth & Croft 2006: 15). To extend the ramifications of these concepts, it may be demonstrated that “[m]any assumptions we make about homes are linked to cultural or national reference points” (Atkinson & Jacobs 2016: 2). Whatever the context in which house and home are described, they signify the fundamental human need to define one’s place in the world. Accordingly, the concepts of house and home, in all the range of meanings indicated above, are staple themes in literature.

References

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