

Abstract

Despite a wealth of feminist literary criticism which positions the home as much more than a domestic space, female authors writing about it are still marginalised as favouring issues, ideas and sensibilities less important than their male counterparts. The majority of critics challenging this view focus on specific items within the home, or on social stereotypes: Jenijoy La Belle examines how the mirror can convey a woman's confrontation with her reflection—society's view of her; and Giselle Bastine analyses gossip as a device in women's writing. To date, little research has been directed toward the importance of the domestic space as a whole even though it is a powerful device that represents choice and innovation, rather than the limitations of personal experience. Therefore, this thesis addresses the question: in what ways has the domestic space been repurposed in contemporary realist texts to reflect the preoccupations and intentions of the author?

Using two different, yet complimentary, methods of enquiry—interwoven creative and exegetical chapters, I analyse and reflect on the social expectations which are traditionally aligned to the house, the home and women's writing. The resulting document is a practice-based project, divided equally, exemplifying how female contemporary realist writers can, and do, repurpose the domestic space in their work, transforming it into a thematic device of empowerment, one which represents choice and innovations.

This document does not follow a traditional thesis format. I have structured my findings to reflect how my research topic has formed out of my desire to better understand both my creative and theoretical practices, and also to reflect how female writers have repurposed the domestic space in their work. My creative work, *Closed Doors and Sour Soap* and *Along the Bruce*, act as a split-continual narrative that speaks to, and is informed by, the exegetical components, *Exposed Beams* and *Renovations and Extensions*. These chapters, respectively, explore feminist literary criticism and cultural theories on the structures of power, specifically Michel de Certeau's strategies and tactics and Pierre Bourdieu's habitus. The final chapter, *Moving House* is a blend of creative and exegetical components that analyse Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977) and *The Spare Room* (2008), as well as my own creative practice. Ultimately, through its structure and content, this thesis demonstrates how traditional ideas of the domestic space have, and can be repurposed to reflect women's agency in their practice.

Introduction:

The Welcome Mat

Pacing Along the Hallway

My friends and I began our journey into adulthood with feminism far from our minds. Long before Julia Gillard, as Australia's first female Prime Minister, defended women's 'ability to wield authority' outside of a 'role [based] in the home' (Gardiner 2012), we had been taught that our society was equal; that, in the Western world, we wouldn't be held back because of our gender. Our parents, for those of us who had two, shared their work-life responsibilities equally and the rest of us grew up watching our mothers take command over everything—not in a tyrannical sense, but by executing an awe-inspiring confidence that made their lives look easy. As we grew up, the females in our group were taken seriously when we said that one day we wanted to be in charge of a company; to own our own businesses. The world in which women relied solely on men seemed so far away—it was something our grandmothers talked about because they were old fashioned and a little bit weird. We were the generation of girls who could do anything.

Before I commenced this Honours year, a friend alerted me to the recurrent use of the domestic space in my creative work. Instead of taking the form of a traditional, setting-based motif, the space, in my work, presented as a sense of security—an emotional response to familial relationships. As I reflected on my use of the domestic space, and on my own upbringing, it made sense that I didn't conform to traditional images. I'd grown up watching my mother transform herself from a nurse, to an economics graduate, to a practicing lawyer and had noticed, with pride, the increasing presence of women in power in the Western world. It seemed, to me at least, that women in my society were free from restriction—even in the books I read, there was an equal spread of genders writing over a wide range of genres. As I read further however, my views started to change and I began to question the sentiment of "endless possibilities" that I'd always been promised. In a world where mainstream media delivered images of politicians rated by their gender over their policies¹, it seemed increasingly unlikely that I, as an aspiring female writer, could ever truly create a name for myself that was free from judgement—a reputation based on my achievements in practice rather than my gender.

¹ I refer here to instances of Julia Gillard, for example, being described as a 'feminist hero and darling [come] hapless joke...giggling awkwardly outside her boyfriend's shed at The Lodge as she meekly obeyed his ban on women' (Bolt 2011); and Anna Bligh, presented initially by her role as a mother, then as a product of her achievements—a 'straight-talking [woman with] teenage sons, [who'd been] schooled in half a dozen portfolios.' (King 2010).

This thesis has evolved from questioning my position as a writer in contemporary Western society. In acknowledging the domestic space as the core narrative device in my creative practice, I was confronted by the restriction still placed on women's agency in the field of creative writing. Despite a wealth of feminist criticism which positions the home as much more than a domestic space, female authors employing it as a narrative device are still marginalised as favouring issues and ideas less important than their male counterparts. Although the reinterpretation of patriarchal theories and concepts² has done much to challenge such views, women are still regarded primarily as creators of *écriture féminine*—‘that impressionistic, sometimes breathless, commonly lyrical, often rhapsodic *expression* of women's difference’ (Belsey 2000, 1157).

While I agree that this description is something to be embraced—that women should be able to express their differences and stand alone from male writers, my issue is with applying such a broad term to a naturally diverse gender. Across the texts that I've examined, specifically Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* (1977) and *The Spare Room* (2008), the language is sparse and incisive—understated but clear. This style is unique to Garner, though it in no way represents Belsey's definition of *écriture féminine*. Garner's work embodies language restriction; however it also presents vivid images of characters and daily life. I argue that it is through the use of thematic devices, specifically the domestic space, that this converse imagery has been achieved—in her dealings with the house and the concept of home, Garner has created technically understated (in regards to word choices and sentence structure), powerful narratives that reflect full and detailed lives.

The home presents as a universal motif that transcends architectural experiences and social and cultural statuses. As Smyth and Croft indicate in *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture* (2006), the idea of home is a familiar concept to all members of society regardless of the various ways they may have experienced, or longed to experience it. In Garner's work the home manifests as a representation of authorial memory and experience—it acts as a metaphor for the journey of characters and functions as a mirror to social and cultural conventions. In my own creative work, the home is a place of security—it is an emotional response to familial relationships (particularly mother-daughter relationships) as well as a physical, though fictionalised, architectural structure.

² In particular Gilbert and Gubar's 'the anxiety of authorship' (Eagleton 1996, 37) and their concept of a matrilineage, both of which will be explored in Chapter One.

Taking the form of a practice-based qualitative study that uses a post-structuralist approach, this thesis, as previously indicated, is predominantly ficto-critical in appearance. While I am mindful of Claire Woods' statement that 'it is not sufficient to produce a text which plays around for the sake of playing around' (2007, 5), I maintain the values of the framework in which I am researching—that is, the context of feminist literary criticism. Belsey states that 'feminists want readers to look up occasionally from the text, not to read another necessarily, but to reflect, compare, differ—in a word, to consider' (2000, 1159). Therefore, despite employing two quite traditional chapters to present the exegetical components of the thesis, each possess a '...strong presence of personal voice' (Dawson 2005, 167) and alternate with two extracts of my creative work. This has been done to encourage consideration and to mimic the freedom and opportunity female writers have over the presentation of the domestic space in their work. In essence the structure and components of my thesis speak to and reflect each other—an approach derived from Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1978). Although she refers specifically to the concept of a 'female imagination' (Eagleton 1986, 12), Showalter states that women's writing should be treated as 'the product of a delicate network of influences operating in time, and it must be analyzed [*sic*] as it expresses itself...' (Eagleton 1986, 12).

One of my first hurdles in approaching this thesis was deciding and defining what I meant by 'the home'. Before I could create any prose to weave throughout my exegetical structures, it seemed vital to understand why my own practice and interests (both creative and theoretical) had led me to commence such studies. Initially I considered the domestic space within which literary women have been depicted in accordance with rigid Victorian concepts of femininity—as the 'angels in the house' (Archibald quoted in Golden 2004, 373-374). I was also interested in the architectural structure of the house; its varied appearances which are dependent on cultural upbringing and socio-economic standing. As I considered these options, I recognised a familiarity between my own work and that of the authors I was reading. The texts that stood out most clearly were the two that bookend Helen Garner's career to date, *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*.

In Garner's work I noted a familiar preference for masking personal experience with fictional prose. Like me, she told stories of her childhood; of mothers and influencing matriarchal figures and different places she had lived in. By acknowledging this, I was able to define my own concept of 'home' as one which rose out of power theory and the second-wave feminist movement—a concept that manifests as a transitional space that characters move in, from and through. The home in my work challenges boundaries and gendered

preconceptions—it is a space where women can exist without conforming to the stereotypes of historically influenced gender roles and instead use their femininity to their advantage; they own the spaces to which they've previously been confined. The creative components in this thesis initially appear to sideline my concept of home in favour of developing the narrative of the protagonist and her mother. However, in establishing the bond between these characters (through the unspoken acknowledgment of the protagonist's absent father and the ways in which the duo interact), the home remains at the forefront of each narrative—it is the feeling of security that exists wherever the characters are.

In my practice, 'form and content are inseparable' (Richardson 1994). Paul Dawson states that 'metafiction has always been a useful genre for those who are interested in the craft of writing because its self-reflexivity draws attention to the art (iface) [*sic*] of fiction' (2005, 165). Describing this further, in what he calls 'the avant-garde model' of negotiating theory, Dawson suggests that 'the ultimate goal is not to illuminate theory through practice, but to remake it, and to encourage innovative writing through experiments' (2005, 165-166). This is not dissimilar to Woods' discussions of innovations in the creative exegesis, who, in quoting Rob Pope and Raymond Williams, discusses the exegesis and creative practice combination as a 're-creation'; an 'act of practical consciousness...[that is] likely to generate many forms' (2007, 2). Such notions are vital to my research topic and the presentation of my outcomes. Grenfell states that 'Bourdieu's concepts have no value if they are not used in practice' (2008, 5) and therefore, questioning the ways in which the domestic space has been repurposed in contemporary realist texts to reflect the preoccupations and intentions of the author has no value if not applied and discussed in the voice and style of my own creative practice.

By featuring the home as a constant, yet subtle, motif throughout my creative extracts, each more traditional chapter is set up to reflect overt themes of discussion—those which are signposted by the preceding narrative. They also simultaneously inform the direction that the next creative work will take. The first of these chapters, *Exposed Beams*, presents the framework through which I have viewed my selected texts—that of feminist literary criticism. Expanding on the concerns of the feminist theorists whom I have just discussed, I will focus on Belsey's statement that 'the issue [which] concerns [her], is not whether women do as a matter of course write differently but whether feminists as a matter of strategy ought to' (Henderson 2002, 178). Through this, I will demonstrate the ways in which such criticism has influenced my interpretation of my selected texts and, in turn, shaped my own creative practice.

Chapter Two, *Renovations and Extensions*, continues on from Belsey's mention of strategies by focusing on de Certeau's theories and Bourdieu's key concepts. Although these theorists present their methods in slightly different ways, they both discuss various methods of acquiring and executing power within seemingly restrictive environments. By interrogating the discrepancies between their concepts³, I will focus on how these theorists address the notion of imposed power and restriction—an idea which has provided the core of my research topic. As such, this chapter will present, what I argue to be, the function of the home in my analysed texts. It will show the space as a tactical site that can be manipulated and repurposed to overcome strategic intentions.

Chapter Three is the most innovative of my exegetical sections and combines both creative work and textual analysis to summarise the findings of my project. By introducing this final section through the voice of my creative works' narrator, I exemplify how the theories outlined in the first two chapters have manifested in my practice, and how I see them playing out in the works of Helen Garner. By ending with a more ficto-critical approach, I emphasise the structure of the wider thesis document and how, as I've said previously, it reflects my conclusions and findings—the ways in which female writers can, and have repurposed the domestic space. Overall, this thesis will identify the abundance of feminist criticism which positions the home as more than a domestic space. In doing so, it will illuminate how approaches like Gilbert and Gubar's 'anxiety of authorship' (Eagleton 1996, 37) have done much to transform the current marginalisation of women writers using the home as a narrative device and how cultural and power theory can strengthen this outcome even more.

Julia Kristeva states that '...it still remains *politically* essential for feminists to defend women *as* women in order to counteract the patriarchal oppression that precisely despises women *as* women' (Moi 2002, 3)—this is what my thesis explore. The home, in contemporary works of fiction, I argue, can be viewed as a tactical place, as opposed to a socially constructed strategic method of restricting women's agency. It is a powerful device that represents choice and innovation, rather than the limitations of personal experience. By repurposing the space—that is, not viewing the house and the home as a traditional, fixed and structured setting, I argue that female contemporary realist writers execute a confidence in their gender and their practice. By demonstrating power in their work, these authors give me

³ For example, where Bourdieu '[emphasises] the social construction of culture and the strategies individuals adopt to advance themselves and their families...' (Grenfel 2008, 23), de Certeau presents his own, somewhat conflicting, definition of strategies—'proper' (1988, xix-29) places that seek to create conformity.

something to aspire to—they reinstate hope to the generation of girls who were once told they could do anything.