

**The Literature of the Boarding House:  
Female Transient Space in the 1930s**

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of English Language and Literature

Michaelmas 2011

## **Abstract**

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This thesis investigates a neglected sub-genre of women's writing, which I have termed the literature of the boarding house. Focusing on unmarried women, this is a study of the alternative rooms 'of one's own' that existed in the nineteen thirties: from the boarding house and hotel, to the bed-sitting room or single room as a paying guest in another family's house. The 1930s is defined by the conflict between women's emerging social and economic independence and a dominant ideology that placed increased importance on domesticity, the idea of 'home' and women's place within the familial structure. My research highlights the incompatibility between the idealised images of domestic life that dominated the period and the reality for the single woman living in temporary accommodation. The boarding house existed outside conventional notions of female domestic space with its connotations of stability and family life. Women within the boarding house were not only living outside traditional domestic structures; they were placing themselves outside socially and culturally defined domestic roles. The boarding house was both a new space of modernity, symbolising women's independence, and a continued imitation of the bourgeois home modelled on rituals of middle-class behaviour. Through an examination of novels by Elizabeth Bowen, Lettice Cooper, Stella Gibbons, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, and E. H. Young, this study privileges the literary as a way in which to understand the space of the boarding house. Not only does the boarding house blur the boundaries between public and private space, it also challenges the traditional conceptions of the family home as the sole location of private domestic space. I argue that by placing their characters in the in-between space of the boarding house, the authors can reflect on the liminal spaces that existed for women both socially and sexually. In the literature of the boarding house, the novel becomes a site for representing women's experiences that were usually on the periphery of traditional narratives, as well as a literary medium for articulating the wider social and economic issues affecting the lives of unmarried women.

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## **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Council who funded my doctoral research. I would also like to acknowledge the support of the School of English and Humanities at Birkbeck, University of London, where this project was initially started, and the Faculty of English, University of Oxford. I have benefited hugely from the stimulating research environments at both institutions. The London Space Reading Group has provided intellectual support and encouragement throughout the four years of this thesis and particular thanks go to Antonio Venezia, Henderson Downing, and Lisa Mullen. For their help in tracking down materials, I would like to extend my thanks and appreciation to the librarians at The British Library, The Women's Library, London, and The Bodleian Library, Oxford.

My thanks go to all my friends and colleagues who have supported me in this project and listened to me talk about boarding houses. For encouraging me to embark on this journey I am grateful to Anne Rigg. I would like to thank my friend Rachael Corver for championing me on and reminding me that there is life outside of the thesis with regular cultural outings. I am deeply indebted to Dr Victoria McNeile for reading and discussing my ideas and for sharing my passion for this subject. I have enjoyed many hours of enthusiastic debate over cups of tea and glasses of wine with Siân Thomas, whose brilliance and stimulating conversations have inspired me since I was an undergraduate; for reading my work and encouraging me on thank you so much.

Special thanks and gratitude go to my supervisor, Dr Rebecca Beasley, for her support, unstinting encouragement, and continued belief in my project.

I owe the greatest debts to my family, whose love and support enabled me to complete this thesis. Much love and thanks are due to my mother for her unwavering belief in me. For Neil Hornsey, who has lived with this project daily and sustained me with humour and good cooking, love and thanks for everything.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Michael Mullholland, who cheered me on every step of the way, but did not live to see the final product: this is for you with all my love.

## Abbreviations

- ADO Storm Jameson, *A Day Off* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933)
- AHTS Jane Hukk, *Abdullah and His Two Strings* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1927)
- ALMM Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930; repr. London: Penguin, 2000)
- B Stella Gibbons, *Bassett* (London: Longmans, 1935)
- BDT Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Martin Heidegger, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 145-61
- CT Catherine Thackray, *Ta in her own words. Reminiscences and Observations*, Compiled posthumously by Becca (Rebecca Thackray), Ref: 7CTH/1, Archive and Museum Collection, The Women's Library, London
- DH Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (1938; repr. London: Vintage, 1998)
- IN Ellen Burgess, 'Indecision', *English Review*, 51 (September 1930), 387-92
- JW E. H. Young, *Jenny Wren* (1932; repr. London: Virago, 1985)
- NH Lettice Cooper, *The New House* (1936; repr. London: Persephone Books, 2004)
- OOS Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16 (1986), 22-27
- PEL Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)
- POS Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)
- PS Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994).
- SPG Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994)
- TTN Elizabeth Bowen, *To the North* (1932; repr. London: Penguin, 1960)
- VD Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; repr. London: Penguin, 2000)
- WITS Rosamond Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936; repr. London: Virago, 1981)
- Y Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (1937; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

## The Literature of the Boarding House: Female Transient Space in the 1930s

### Introduction

The room was crowded with a hundred things  
 Ugly and pitiful. The very walls  
 Were yellowish-white and stained – like white-born flowers  
 Withering to their death – and overstrewn  
 With garish pictures that hung jostled there,  
 Awry in tarnished frames. [...]

Withered they were, the women who had place  
 In this backwater room. They were no kin –  
 Had wandered here by diverse ways. And yet  
 Something still bonded them: Some hopelessness,  
 A sense of life behind a closing door,  
 A brittle bitterness that overlaid  
 The crumbled things beneath. [...]

These women, all unmarried and grown old,  
 Dwelt on the hour when they had come most near  
 To that which never was to be for them. [...]

Muriel D. Blanckensee, 'In a Boarding-house'<sup>1</sup>

Published in the *English Review* in January 1929, Muriel D. Blanckensee's poem 'In a Boarding-house' offers a literary construction of early twentieth-century boarding house life and the unmarried women who occupied this space. What makes this depiction particularly unusual is that it is in the form of a poem. There are extremely isolated examples of representations of the boarding house in poetry, and yet increasingly the boarding house was being written about by women novelists of the interwar period, particularly in novels published in the nineteen thirties.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel D. Blanckensee, 'In a Boarding-house', *English Review*, 48, (1929), 104-5 (p. 104). Blanckensee was the author of several short stories and poems as well as a novel *Chrysalis* (1926).

<sup>2</sup> The best-known example in poetry is the typist in her single room in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. There is also an unpublished poem, 'The Boarding House', in the Wyndham Lewis archive that refers to the inhabitants obeying the bell for mealtimes 'like a flock of sheep', but it does not make specific reference to women. See Cornell University, Wyndham Lewis Collection, 4612, Box 4, Fol. 6, [n.d.]. With thanks to Jamie Wood for alerting me to this poem.

This thesis investigates that neglected sub-genre of women's writing, which I have termed the literature of the boarding house. Focusing on unmarried women, this is a study of the alternative rooms 'of one's own' that existed in the nineteen thirties: from the boarding house and hotel, to the bed-sitting room or single room as a paying guest in another family's house. I refer to these as 'transient' spaces because despite the fact they often became long-term homes, they were only expected to be temporary, for women to occupy in the transitional stage before marriage.

I will return to Blanckensee's poem later, but for now it will be helpful to begin this study of the boarding house novel by considering why there was no equivalent genre of boarding house poetry. Poetry did not evolve from the same domestic genealogy as the novel; modernist poetry stemmed from the nineteenth-century French symbolist tradition with its focus on external urban space.<sup>3</sup> Jane Dowson's anthology of 1930s women's poetry reveals that although several poets mentioned the lives of unmarried women, they very rarely wrote about their accommodation. Frances Cornford's poem 'The Single Woman' refers to 'the houses that you have not needed' and Sylvia Lynd's protagonist in 'The Solitary' laments her single life in which 'I must live alone' and compares herself and her lack of husband and children to a 'ruined house'.<sup>4</sup> Even the poet Anna Wickham, who opened up her house to boarders after the death of her husband in 1929 and was featured in the *Picture Post* in 1946 as 'The Poet Landlady', did not use the everyday life of her boarding house as a subject for her poetry.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Baudelaire was an inhabitant of cheap hotels and boarding houses, but they were not the settings for his poetry where, instead, there is a prevalence of city space often observed by the strolling figure of the male flâneur. When Baudelaire wrote of interiors, it was the abandoned house of 'The Flask' or the in-between space of 'The Balcony'. Christopher Reed has argued that Baudelaire was 'explicit in his anti-domestic bias' in Christopher Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms: Modernism, Subculture, and Domesticity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>4</sup> *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Jane Dowson (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 49, 70.

<sup>5</sup> *The Writings of Anna Wickham: Freewoman and Poet*, ed. by R. D. Smith (London: Virago Press, 1984), p. 28.

The boarding house novel emerged out of the social realism of the nineteenth century and the New Woman novelists of the *fin de siècle*. In an article in 1894, W. T. Stead referred to the emergence in the mid-1890s of the ‘novel of the modern woman’ that was written ‘by a woman about women from the standpoint of Woman’.<sup>6</sup> New Woman authors, such as Sarah Grand, started to depict a very different type of female experience that challenged Victorian sexual codes (Grand’s novel *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) covered the subject of venereal disease) and portrayed women choosing independent lives. In Grand’s novel *The Beth Book* (1897) the heroine Elizabeth Caldwell makes a secret chamber hidden away in the attic of her husband’s house to give her space to write before leaving her husband for a room of her own in a Bayswater lodging house.<sup>7</sup> Male writers also depicted the New Woman living alone in lodgings, for example in George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893), Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did* (1895), and H. G. Wells’s *Ann Veronica* (1909).

The genre of the domestic novel was firmly established by the interwar period when two dominant strands emerged. The first depicted the idealised space of the home and comfortable upper-middle class family life, this included Jan Struther’s novel *Mrs Miniver* (1939), and the work of E. M. Delafield who parodied depictions of cosy domesticity in *Diary of a Provincial Lady* (1930). Although they have a pleasant domestic setting at their core, the home was by no means a straightforward location. This strand also included novels that demonstrated that the vision of settled middle-class domesticity may only be superficial, for example in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938) and in the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, such as *A House and Its Head* (1935) where

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<sup>6</sup> W. T. Stead, ‘The Novel of the Modern Woman’, *Review of Reviews*, 10 (1894), 64-74 (p. 64).

<sup>7</sup> The feminist message of the novel is perhaps weakened by the ending, in which Grand resorted to the standard conclusion of the popular romance novel by depicting Elizabeth’s former neighbour Arthur Brock, from the Bayswater lodging house, ride towards her on horseback: ‘the knight of her long winter vigil’. Sarah Grand, *The Beth Book* (1897; repr. London: Virago, 1980), p. 527.

fraught family interactions take place in the dining-room and drawing-room of an eighteenth-century country house.

The second strand of the domestic novel openly viewed the home as a site of conflict, usually between the older and the younger generation. This is particularly evident in narratives depicting the unmarried woman, where the family home becomes a place from which to escape to the utopian 'room of one's own', as can be seen in novels such as Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924), Winifred Holtby's *The Crowded Street* (1924) and Lettice Cooper's *The New House* (1936).<sup>8</sup> By the 1930s the portrayals of alternative living spaces in this second strand had formed a distinct sub-genre of the domestic novel: the boarding house narrative.

The 1930s is a significant period in the history of the boarding house. Increasingly, large numbers of single women took advantage of the newly created opportunities for employment in the cities, and moved away from their family homes to work and live alone. Census data for England and Wales shows the number of single women over the age of twenty-five increased from 2,181,924 in 1911 to 2,676,504 by 1931, far outnumbering single men whose numbers had only reached 1,934,274 in 1931.<sup>9</sup> For women who had not found a husband by their late twenties there was a high chance that they would never marry. In 1921 fifty per cent of women who were single in their late twenties remained so a decade later (compared to only thirty per cent of men who failed to marry).<sup>10</sup>

Between 1918 and 1939 women's employment also underwent significant changes. With four million men returning to employment and the 'homes fit for heroes' promised by Lloyd George, women were actively encouraged back to a domestic role.

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<sup>8</sup> A novel that crosses between these two strands is D. E. Stevenson's novel *Miss Bunclie's Book* (1934) that depicts an unmarried woman in her late thirties living a comfortable domestic life in a small village.

<sup>9</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables* (London: HMSO, 1935), p. 150.

<sup>10</sup> Jane Lewis, *Women In England 1870-1950: Sexual Divisions and Social Change* (Sussex: Wheatsheaf Books, 1984), p. 4.

The Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act of 1918 returned jobs to men and further legislation, such as expanded marriage bars, restricted women's employment. After the enforced job losses following the Great War, the proportion of working women rose again in the 1920s, and by 1931 just over five and a half million women were in paid employment, accounting for just under thirty per cent of the total labour force.<sup>11</sup> To accommodate this increasing workforce the number of women's lodging houses in London catering for mainly lower-middle and middle-class working women had risen to around one hundred and seventy in 1925 from approximately sixty in 1910.<sup>12</sup>

In the 1930s women were able to explore a greater number of identities, albeit identities that had to be negotiated through the conflicting societal conventions and definitions of femininity that shared an uneasy coexistence in the period. Life for women at the time has been retrospectively defined by its contradictions; the increasing independence of women and greater opportunities outside the home contrasted with a dominant ideology, transmitted through the press and advertising, that placed increased importance on domesticity, the idea of 'home' and women's place within the familial structure.

The great age of the eighteenth-century English house and its representation in literature was in decline by the end of the nineteenth century. Large family houses in urban locations were being sub-divided to create alternative living spaces, as the families that had previously inhabited them moved to the suburbs and newly fashionable locations. However, the idealised image of the Victorian family home never completely disappeared and was strategically resurrected after the Great War in advertising and the national press. In her history of women's magazines, Cynthia White has argued that men returned from the war expecting 'their womanfolk to reassume their "rightful" position in society and to

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<sup>11</sup> Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-war Britain* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>12</sup> Emily Gee, "'Where Shall She Live?': The History and Designation of Housing for Working Women in London 1880-1925', *Journal of Architectural Conservation*, 15 (2009), 27-46 (p. 28).

devote themselves to bringing to life the “dream of home” which had sustained them in the trenches’.<sup>13</sup>

This discussion of boarding house literature highlights the incompatibility between the idealised images of domestic life that dominated the thirties, and the everyday life for the single woman living in temporary accommodation. The boarding house existed outside conventional notions of female domestic space with its connotations of stability and family life and it frequently became representative in this period of all that was not ‘home’. Women within the boarding house were not only living outside traditional domestic structures; they were placing themselves outside socially and culturally defined domestic roles by working and by living alone.

For both boarders and boarding house keepers ‘home’ becomes a contested site as it merges with the commercial marketplace, challenging the categorisation of interior spaces as either public or private. At the same time, the boarding house also became a vital resource for women to experience freedom within the confines of societal respectability. It was both a new space of modernity, symbolising women’s independence, and a continued imitation of the bourgeois home modelled on rituals of middle-class behaviour. *The Girl’s Own Paper*, a publication launched by the Religious Tract Society and targeted at young, unmarried women from the middle and lower middle classes, ran a series of articles on education, work and independent living in the late 1890s. One article entitled ‘How Working Girls Live in London’ argued that: ‘Boarding is preferable to lodging in this, that there is more supervision, and that it keeps up the feeling of family life which it is desirable we should never lose’.<sup>14</sup> The need for women to have supervision is a view that emerges frequently in early twentieth-century discussions of boarding and lodging accommodation for working women. Although it

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<sup>13</sup> Cynthia White, *Women’s Magazines 1693-1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970), p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> Nanette Mason, ‘How Working Girls Live in London: Part III’, *The Girl’s Own Paper*, 31 August 1889, p. 764.

was acknowledged that in many cases women would need somewhere to live, there were concerns for their moral welfare in a boarding house.

One nineteen-year old girl described in her Mass Observation day survey for October 1937 her desire to move out of her family home:

I share, with five girl-friends, a wish for a flat of my own (or to be shared with some one else). We have all been refused this request, & the reasons for refusal have been 1) Insinuation of immediate immorality 2) The Family Must Not be Split Up 3) It is unnecessary; this is your home 4) We could not keep a Strict Eye on you 5) We would miss you, – you are useful here.<sup>15</sup>

Her family's reasons for not letting her move out echo the concerns of commentators in the period: primarily that women living alone without their family to keep 'a Strict Eye' on them would fall into 'immediate immorality'. Indeed, this also reflected popular perceptions that linked the communal aspects of boarding and lodging house life with sexual impropriety.

The room of one's own in the boarding house narrative often starts as a space of independence from the family home. Dorothy Richardson's thirteen-volume series *Pilgrimage* (1915-1967) is the earliest of the literary examples discussed in this study and a rich example of the boarding house narrative. The volumes describing Miriam's life in London lodgings and boarding houses were published between 1919-1938. Set in the 1890s Richardson depicts the New Woman protagonist Miriam Henderson embracing her independent life and her own 'triumphant faithful latchkey'.<sup>16</sup> However, this space of independence can also become a place of economic hardship and social isolation. As the unmarried woman grows older the space that once signified escape comes to denote physical and psychological entrapment, as will be seen in Storm Jameson's novella *A Day Off* (1933) and the novels of Jean Rhys.

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<sup>15</sup> Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex), DS131 Day Survey, October 1937.

<sup>16</sup> Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage*, 4 vols (1915-1967; repr. London, Virago, 1979), vol. II, p. 325. Virago republished Richardson's novels in four volumes in 1979. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with the volume number.

Novelists depicting women living in boarding houses, hotels, shared flats and bed sitting-rooms whose work was published in the 1930s and who are discussed in this study range from the canonical to the lesser-known: Elizabeth Bowen, Lettice Cooper, Stella Gibbons, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf, and E. H. Young.<sup>17</sup> I also include Una Marson's play *London Calling* (1937) for its fictional insight into the life of a colonial woman living in a shared flatlet. Extracts from popular romance and crime novels, such as Annie Bradshaw's *Murder at the Boarding House* (1936) and Margery Maitland Davidson's *Full Board* (1932), are also included in order to demonstrate that the themes and motifs appearing in low-brow literature were part of the culture that created the pervasive images of boarding house life.

It is only in the last thirty years that literary criticism has started to address in detail the women writers who had been erased from the 1930s canon. The publishers Virago launched their Modern Classic series in 1978 dedicated to reprinting women writers, and in 1983 published Nicola Beauman's study *A Very Great Profession: The Women's Novel 1914-39*.<sup>18</sup> Beauman also founded her own publishing company Persephone Books in 1998 to bring these novelists of the interwar period back into print. Many of the books surveyed by Beauman are by writers who would later be described as 'middlebrow' and analysed by Nicola Humble in 2001. Humble argued that the feminine middlebrow novel was significant in both consolidating and resisting new class and gender identities in the period due to 'its paradoxical allegiance to both domesticity and a radical sophistication that makes this literary form so ideologically flexible'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Although the books discussed in this thesis were published in the 1930s, not all of them are set at the time of writing and many depict an earlier period, for example Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series was set in the 1890s, Storm Jameson's novella, *A Day Off* (1933) is located just after the Great War, and Virginia Woolf's novel *The Years* begins in 1880 and progresses to the 'Present Day' section of 1936.

<sup>18</sup> Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Women's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 3.

From the initial recovery of these novelists, writers such as Maroula Joannou and Alison Light wrote critical accounts that situated these women within the political context of the thirties.<sup>20</sup> Light identified a ‘conservative modernity’ in women’s interwar fiction, both modernist and middlebrow, whereby the space of the home became a site for social reconfigurations and a ‘less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private’ version of Englishness. ‘It is the women of an expanding middle class between the wars’, Light has argued, ‘who were best able to represent Englishness in both its most modern and reactionary forms’.<sup>21</sup>

This thesis is not primarily concerned with recovering the writers themselves, although many of the novels examined that are out of print, such as Stella Gibbons’s *Bassett* (1934), deserve to be rediscovered. Instead it is concerned with the identification of the boarding house as a literary setting within a specific historical and spatial framework. Considering these writers alongside each other from the perspective of their shared concern with boarding house spaces enables them to be examined on the same terms. Writers in this group have been variously labelled ‘middlebrow’ or ‘modernist’ and some occupy contested positions between the two in literary accounts. What we can take from cultural history is to see all forms of literature as equally valid in contributing to an understanding of the boarding house as literary setting. Examining these novels together highlights the commonalities between them, such as the intersections between interior space and character interiority. In their work on the interwar writings of E. H. Young, Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezi state:

we enter into the fray of interwar and current discussions surrounding ‘middlebrow’ and applaud rather than criticize its elasticity. [...] Rather than

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<sup>20</sup> See Maroula Joannou, ‘*Ladies Please Don’t Smash These Windows*’, *Women’s Writing, Feminist Consciousness and Social Change 1914-1938* (Oxford: Berg, 1995); *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender Politics and History*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism Between the Wars* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> Light, *Forever England*, pp. 10, 8, 10-11.

dooming Young's texts, along with many other domestic novels, to be shelved under "culturally significant" writing, we claim a literary status for them.<sup>22</sup>

The claim for literary status is relevant to this analysis of the boarding house narrative, for it is not only 'culturally significant' that this form of accommodation was being depicted in novels by women at this specific time, it is also significant that these representations took a particular literary form in order to articulate the experience of the unmarried woman through her transient living spaces.

In her 'Foreword' to *Pilgrimage*, written in 1938, Richardson refers to her attempt 'to produce a feminine equivalent of the current masculine realism' (I, 9). Lyn Pykett has described the 'new realism' produced by women writers like Richardson and Woolf as 'an interior realism rather than a realism based on the external accumulation of details; an impressionistic realism which was founded on the registering of perceptions rather than on the recording of an inventory'.<sup>23</sup>

The boarding house genre grounds this interior realism in detailed recordings of the interior space, as the rooms are mediated through the minds of the female inhabitants. Thus, within the broader category of women's writing in the interwar period, the boarding house novel emerges as a hybrid of the modernist and realist domestic fiction written and read by women in that period, crossing the boundaries of high and middlebrow fiction. While domestic fiction portraying the home focuses on the standard narratives of social manners and romance, the boarding house novel is concerned almost entirely with the individual, and the focus on the interior space of the room and the transient spaces of streets and cafés produces a heightened interiority. The liminal space of the boarding house provides a distinct narrative trope for exploring female subjectivity and offers a radical disruption from literary conventions by overlaying the realism of the boarding

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<sup>22</sup> Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p. 12.

<sup>23</sup> Lyn Pykett, *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p. 75.

house experience with the interiority of the female subject evolved from modernist fiction.

This merging of the domestic interior with the interiority of the character is what makes the boarding house novels written by women in the thirties distinct from the London boarding house worlds portrayed by male novelists from the late nineteenth century to the nineteen forties, including Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, and later, George Orwell, Patrick Hamilton, Julian Maclaren-Ross, and Norman Collins.<sup>24</sup> These writers depict boarding house spaces predominately from a male perspective and presentations of female interiority are limited, with the exception of Hamilton who was to attempt a female point of view in the character of Miss Roach in *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947). Although these writers foreground the connection between character and setting, particularly in the case of Dickens, it is the wider urban context of London that is the stage. In these novels the boarding house becomes a device for situating a plot-driven narrative, rather than for exploring interiority through interior space.

It would have been interesting to examine the world of the boarding house as perceived by the bachelor male alongside the female representations, but this would be a much larger project outside the scope of this thesis. Historically, the boarding house was a very different place for the bachelor man, for whom it was a far more socially acceptable way of life that allowed greater freedom, than it was for the spinster woman. Perhaps because of this, the authors utilise their male characters' greater access to public spaces within the plot, and so the narratives are not turned inwards to reflect the insular nature of the room.

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<sup>24</sup> Boarding house worlds are portrayed in many of Dickens's novels such as the depictions of Todger's boarding house in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) and Mrs Tibbs's boarding house in *Sketches by Boz* (1836). Arthur Conan Doyle's heroes Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson have lodgings together in Baker Street and boarding houses feature in many of the tales, such as 'The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax' (1911) and 'The Valley of Fear' (1914-15). Boarding houses are the settings for George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936); Norman Collins's *London Belongs to Me* (1945); Julian Maclaren-Ross's, *Of Love and Hunger* (1947), and the works of Patrick Hamilton including: *Craven House* (1926), *Hangover Square* (1941) and *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947).

A study of the boarding house could have been written as a social or cultural history, as well as a literary criticism. Indeed the boundaries between literary criticism and history are porous throughout this work. However, it is the boarding house setting as a particular literary device that enables a particular type of narrative, and the form these representations take, that is the primary concern here.

The boarding house provides narrative opportunities for a writer; it does not just fictionalise history. Setting a narrative in a space outside the conventional structures of the family home allows authorial exploration of experiences outside traditional domestic narrative concerns, including lesbian relationships, extra-martial affairs, and abortion. This enables a more socially and politically aware literature to emerge in this alternative domestic space. The writers of boarding house literature were able to address social issues through the vehicle of fiction in a more subtle way than their New Women predecessors, who used the fictional world of their novels to raise political awareness. In the absence of conventional fictional closures such as marriage, the authors can utilise open-ended conclusions that signal that the everyday life of the character will continue after the final word.

The boarding house narrative also provides imaginative opportunities. An historical study would only enable a partial understanding, for it is through the literature that we have the majority of accounts of what this type of life may be like. Although we cannot treat the literature unquestioningly as historical evidence, a literary criticism allows an understanding of what the boarding house may have meant culturally and socially through the ways in which it was represented through literature. Light articulates this mutual interaction between cultural history and fiction arguing that:

Because novels not only speak from their cultural moment but take issue with it, imagining new versions of its problems, exposing, albeit by accident as well as by

design, its confusions, conflicts and irrepressible desires, the study of fiction is an especially inviting and demanding way into the past.<sup>25</sup>

The genre sheds light on how women experienced the boarding house, particularly through authors, such as Dorothy Richardson and Jean Rhys, who actually lived in this form of accommodation.

Virginia Woolf referred to the ‘infinitely obscure lives’ of women that ‘remain to be recorded’ in her 1929 essay *A Room of One’s Own*.<sup>26</sup> These literary texts also need an historical context in order to be understood. I read the literature of the boarding house as part of the historically specific discourses affecting women in the early twentieth century: the conflict between marriage and spinsterhood, issues of home, privacy and domesticity, as well as wider concerns of class, sexuality and nation. This thesis considers both literary and historical representations together in order to generate a more nuanced consideration of boarding house life. As Bryony Randall has recently argued, reading historical and literary texts together is mutually beneficial, the literature illuminates the ‘affective contexts’ of historical experience and provides ‘a much richer, deeper understanding of the historical realities’ it describes.<sup>27</sup> One of the things that literature does, if it is contemporary, is to put the reader in touch with situated accounts of everyday life.

Scholarly work on the boarding house has been limited. The social historian Leonore Davidoff published an essay ‘The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century England’ in 1979, in which she stated that:

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<sup>25</sup> Light, *Forever England*, p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own / Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 116.

<sup>27</sup> Bryony Randall, “‘Telling the Day’ in Beatrice Potter Webb and Dorothy Richardson: The Temporality of the Working Woman”, *Modernist Cultures*, 5 (2010), 243-66 (p. 264).

Historians, as well as other social commentators, have tended to regard lodging as an insignificant phenomenon in recent history. When they have noticed it at all, it has been treated primarily as a housing category.<sup>28</sup>

Davidoff's essay remains the only historical work to date on women in boarding houses in Britain.<sup>29</sup> Literary scholars have also largely ignored discussion of the space of the boarding house, dismissing it as a backdrop, rather than an integral part of the narrative.<sup>30</sup>

Elizabeth Bowen observed in her 1945 essay on novel writing: 'Nothing can happen nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it'.<sup>31</sup> Bowen's formulation is strikingly similar to those that appear in the theories of space articulated by Martin Heidegger in his lecture of 1951, 'Building Dwelling Thinking' and subsequently by Gaston Bachelard in his 1958 work *The Poetics of Space*. Both examine the relationship of an individual to the places they inhabit: Heidegger's existential concept equates dwelling with a person's 'being' in the world, and Bachelard applies this abstract model to the specific locale of the house.<sup>32</sup> In the literature of the boarding house, I argue that the relationship between place, plot and character is

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<sup>28</sup> Leonore Davidoff, 'The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century England', in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. by Sandra Burman (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 64-97 (p. 65).

<sup>29</sup> The phenomenon of boarding has been explored more in American history, see Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2007); Kari Boyd McBride, 'A (Boarding) House is Not a Home: Women's Work and Woman's Worth on the Margins of Domesticity', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 17 (1996), 90-112; Paul Groth, *Living Downtown: The History of Residential Hotels in the United States* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Mark Peel, 'On the Margins: Lodgers and Boarders in Boston, 1860-1900', *Journal of American History*, 72 (1986), 813-34; John Modell and Tamara K. Hareven, 'Urbanization and the Malleable Household: An Examination of Boarding and Lodging in American Families', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 35 (1973), 467-79. For a comic look at different types of boarding house in 1850s New York see Thomas Gunn, *The Physiology of New York Boarding-Houses* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1857).

<sup>30</sup> One of the only discussions of the boarding house in literature can be found in Briganti and Mezei, *Domestic Modernism, the Interwar Novel, and E. H. Young* in the chapter 'Vicarages and Lodging-houses', that looks at the alternative households of vicarages and lodging houses that appear in the novels of E. H. Young (pp. 111-30). Kate Macdonald has recently looked at lodgings in London in the fiction of Una L. Siberrad and Dornford Yates, see Kate Macdonald, 'The Use of London Lodgings in Middlebrow Fiction, 1900-1930s', *Literary London: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Representation of London*, 9 (March 2011) <<http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/macdonald.html>> [accessed 14 September 2011]

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, 'Notes on Writing a Novel' in *Collected Impressions* by Elizabeth Bowen (London: Longmans, 1950), pp. 249-63 (p. 253).

<sup>32</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Martin Heidegger, trans. by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 145-61; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994).

explicit and mutually dependent. The relationship between the physical space of the boarding house and the lives of the women within - the female boarders, landladies, and the landladies' daughters - is the key concern of this thesis.

Geographically, the wider locale is also important. Boarding house novels tend to be urban texts and this thesis primarily focuses on London. In the narratives where the main character is the landlady, rather than the boarder, these are often set in the university cities where women were more likely to be landladies renting out rooms to students, rather than boarders or lodgers themselves.<sup>33</sup> Ken Worpole has identified three principal settings for the London novel that 'represent the key spatial and territorial forms of the city itself, [...] the novel of the street, the novel of the tenement dwelling or rooming-house, and the novel of the bourgeois interior'.<sup>34</sup> What is interesting is that Worpole does not simply make a distinction between interior and exterior, he defines two specific types of interior space that are distinguished by their relationship to class and economics. These two interior spaces existed in parallel to each other in both historical accounts and literary representations and, particularly in the nineteen thirties, are frequently portrayed in opposition.

In twenty-first-century literary studies there has been a recent critical shift from thinking about women and their relationship with the city streets and the potential for a female *flâneur* to thinking about the domestic space of the home.<sup>35</sup> However, the same

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<sup>33</sup> Stella Gibbons's novel *Bassett* (1935) is set in Reading, E. H. Young's *Jenny Wren* (1932) in Bristol and Catherine Thackray's autobiography is set in her mother's boarding house in Cambridge.

<sup>34</sup> Ken Worpole, 'Mother to legend (or going underground): the London novel', in *Peripheral Visions: Images of Nationhood in Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. by Ian A. Bell (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995), pp. 181-93 (p. 184).

<sup>35</sup> For an analysis of women's relationship with the city in literature see Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Wilson, *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, the Control of Disorder, and Women* (London: Virago Press, 1991) and Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (1985), 37-46. For recent discussions of the domestic interior in early twentieth-century literature see Wendy Gan, *Women, Privacy and Modernity in Early Twentieth-Century British Writing (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009)*; Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) and Reed, *Bloomsbury Rooms*.

critical attention has not been given to the alternative interior space of the single room in the boarding or lodging house.

In addition to reading the literature of the boarding house in relation to history, this thesis also considers the boarding house as both material and imaginative space, interrogating the literary and historical texts through critical ideas of home and space from philosophical and geographical disciplines.<sup>36</sup> Andrew Thacker has highlighted recently the importance of considering ‘how the interiority of psychic space is often profoundly informed by exterior social spaces’.<sup>37</sup> Taking up Bachelard’s suggestion in *The Poetics of Space* that we ‘read a room’, spatial theory provides a framework for considering the stories these interiors tell, not only of individual characters, but of a particular way of life for the unmarried woman in the thirties.<sup>38</sup> This interaction between place, memory and self plays a vital role in the composition of the boarding house narrative and in understanding its female inhabitants.

The ways of theorising how space is perceived, conceived, and lived that were posited by Henri Lefebvre in the 1960s enable new ways of conceptualising not only the public, social spaces of the city, but the specifically urban interiors of rented rooms, hotels, boarding houses and other temporary accommodation. Lefebvre interprets space as actively produced; for him the house is a place of movement and connection, which is ‘permeated from every direction by streams of energy [...] an image of a complex of

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<sup>36</sup> There has been much recent critical interest in the spatial and geographic aspects of literature. See Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) and *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces* ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005). In relation to women’s literature and space see Minrose C. Gwin, *The Woman in the Red Dress: Gender, Space and Reading* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002) and *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place*, ed. by Anna Snaith and Michael H. Whitworth (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>37</sup> Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity*, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 14, subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with PS.

mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits'.<sup>39</sup> This is a way of understanding the boarding house, as a social product that is dependent upon social interactions in order to construct space. Reflecting the fragmented spaces of modernity, the boarding house enabled the complex intersections of different kinds of private and public space.

One of the key insights that the theories of Lefebvre and also those of Michel Foucault and Michel de Certeau bring to a study of the boarding house is an understanding of the power relations and the structures of those power relations that are inherent in productions of space. However, in using these theories to understand the specifically female experience of the boarding house it is important to acknowledge the gendered nature of these concepts. The theories of Lefebvre and de Certeau are predicated on a single user of space: a male, urban worker. While detailed attention is given to the class-based ideological structures of everyday life in the production of space, limited textual space is given to women and the production and reproduction of gender inequalities and power within society.

In her influential 1994 work *Space, Place and Gender*, the geographer Doreen Massey asserts that space is both produced by and a product of gender relations: 'space and place, spaces and places [...] are gendered through and through'.<sup>40</sup> Massey's analysis of social space articulates how spaces and places are created and changed by the society within which they operate. Gender distinctions in space are not rigidly fixed, they are changed and changeable by actions: 'They are unfixed in part precisely because the social relations out of which they are constructed are themselves by their very nature dynamic and changing' (SPG 169). Massey's proposal is for a more fluid, boundary-less conception of space that allows for a 'simultaneous multiplicity of spaces: cross-cutting,

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<sup>39</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 93. Although published in France in 1974 it was not translated into English until 1991. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with POS.

<sup>40</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), p. 186. Subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with SPG.

intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relations of paradox or antagonism’ (SPG 3).

Lefebvre states at the beginning of *The Production of Space* that when evoking space, ‘we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so’ (POS 12). However, to do this all the elements within space need to be considered and this includes the different types of people using that space, the different purposes for which they are using space and the relationships and interconnections between the two. This is not simply to foreground women where they have previously been excluded, but to create a conceptual framework for considering the role of gender in the production of space. By exploring women’s relationships with the transient spaces they inhabit I highlight the neglected aspects of the unmarried women’s experience and demonstrate how these alternative domestic spaces are inherently linked to the spatial politics of home and identity.

In situating the boarding house in this study as a specific material and symbolic space, I also hope to demonstrate how the boarding house emerged as both a fictional and cultural creation. The geographer Rob Shields coined the term ‘place-myth’ in order to understand how places ‘are actualised and endowed with meaning’. A place-myth is constructed from a series of place-images that produce a particular version of reality: ‘Images, being partial and often either exaggerated or understated, may be accurate or inaccurate. They result from stereotyping [...] or from prejudices towards places or their inhabitants’.<sup>41</sup> In considering the evolution of representations of the boarding house, and the ways in which different myths have been ignored or privileged by authors, this thesis attempts to identify and recover women’s everyday experiences from the accumulation of historical and literary place-myths.

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<sup>41</sup> Rob Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 60-1.

I want to return briefly to Blanckensee's poem that opened this introduction, in which we see the central themes, and the potential place-myths, of boarding house life articulated in six stanzas. Blanckensee presents the boarding house as a site of disappointment, thwarted sexuality and poverty for women. Ford Madox Ford founded the *English Review* in December 1908, but by the time Blanckensee's poem was published in January 1929 it was under the editorship of Ernest Remnant who was taking the *Review* in a more conservative direction, stating that it would stand for 'the national ideal' and 'advocate a virile and independent Conservatism'.<sup>42</sup> In articulating the romance 'which never was to be' for many women of the interwar period, 'These women, all unmarried and grown old', Blanckensee draws on the stereotypes of unmarried women as 'withered' and the boarding house they inhabit as their 'pitiful' home.

Although Blanckensee is writing towards the end of the modernist period, her poem adopts a high modernist style which echoes the weary tone of sexual disappointment found in T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and 'the 'carefully caught regrets' of his 'Portrait of a Lady'.<sup>43</sup> The room 'crowded with a hundred things' recalls the 'crowd of twisted things' in Eliot's 'Rhapsody on a Windy Night', and the lives of 'all the hands / That are raising dingy shades / In a thousand furnished rooms' in 'Preludes'. The poem is narrated from the perspective of a detached observer and, unlike the use of 'I' in Eliot's 'Prufrock', the women are referred to as 'they' throughout. The poem has a cinematic quality; the slow visual pan of the camera around the room, followed by the close up. The observer describes the 'ugly and pitiful' room where the flowers are 'withering to their death' and there are 'garish pictures' hung 'in tarnished frames'. These descriptions mirror the verbal portraits painted in the next

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *British Literary Magazines: The Victorian and Edwardian Age, 1837-1913*, ed. by Alvin Sullivan (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 127.

<sup>43</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Portrait of a Lady' in *T. S. Eliot Collected Poems 1909-1962*, by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 18.

stanza of the 'withered' women with their 'sagging, fallen mouths' and the 'brittle bitterness that overlaid / The crumbled things beneath'.

The women listen to a piano playing in the room. The player of the music is unobserved and 'as the notes / Swelled to an olden tune of old desire', there is a shift in narrative perspective from the interior space of the room to the collective thoughts of the women as the music evokes memories for 'each one of her life's crowning day'. The piano is the only voice in the poem, suggesting a young woman playing to a prospective marriage partner, and as a group the women silently recall those fleeting moments of romance 'when they had come most near / To that which never was to be for them'.

This distancing technique removes Blanckensee from becoming a complete insider in the poem; part of her is always detached, even in the final attempt at interiority. This conveys the impression of a masculine voyeur watching the women seated in their communal sitting-room. These frequent allusions to Eliot, and the use of Eliotian form and style, suggests that Blanckensee is taking on the role of ventriloquist: writing as a man observing women. The women are visually represented, but they have no voices in the poem.

This is the only poem written about the boarding house experience by a woman, but it seems Blanckensee can only perceive the boarding house imaginatively from the outside, in the same way as male interwar novelists, such as Orwell and Hamilton, depicted women in their boarding house worlds. In contrast, women novelists of the nineteen thirties gave voice to the boarding house experience, portraying the boarding house from the inside and writing about the everyday life of these living spaces. Examining these narratives enables an understanding of how the place-myths of the boarding house were created, sustained and challenged by women writers in the thirties.

This thesis is organised into four chapters. The first chapter traces the historical emergence of the boarding house as a living space for women, alongside different

theoretical concepts of interior space, in order to develop an approach to analysing the relationship between the individual and the architectural and social space they inhabit. Through consideration of the debates surrounding ideas of home, privacy, domesticity and respectability I reflect on what the boarding house room ultimately came to represent in social, cultural, and economic terms.

The next three chapters develop key themes impacting on women's experience of the boarding house: social class, sexuality, race and nationality. Although divided into separate chapters for the purpose of this thesis these are not discrete or fixed categories, they overlap and are mutually dependent on the others for their construction and meaning. Discussions of these issues will, therefore, also be integrated into other chapters where necessary. Chapter two looks at social class and I read Stella Gibbons's little-known novel *Bassett* (1934) for its fictional re-evaluation of class signifiers for landlady and boarder in order to understand the complex and multi-layered aspects of class in boarding house life. Using de Certeau's concept of 'tactics' to articulate these spatial power relationships, I argue that any movement towards economic and social agency is achieved only through forfeiting class privilege. The final two sections examine the alternative domestic spaces of the shared house and the hotel, as depicted in Elizabeth Bowen's novels *To the North* (1932) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938).

The third chapter on sexuality and relationships argues that the physical space of the boarding house determines the types of relationships available to women in the 1930s. I analyse Rosamond Lehmann's novel *The Weather in the Streets* (1936) and Jean Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930) and *Voyage in the Dark* (1934). I consider a range of relationships, including sexual arrangements with men where women take on the role of mistress or amateur prostitute in return for economic support, as well as lesbian partnerships and non-sexual co-habitation as long-term female companions. I conclude with an analysis of an unpublished autobiography from The Women's Library archive to

consider the merging boundaries between the boarding house as sexualised space and family home.

The final chapter argues that ideas of home and domesticity within the boarding house are further complicated by negotiations of race and nationality. Through travelogues, novels and the unpublished manuscript of Una Marson's play *London Calling* (1938), I examine the significance of this space for non-British single women travelling to Britain. Placing the boarding house within a wider geographical context, using Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities', I argue that the boarding house can be positioned as a microcosm of urban modernity, and that negotiations between British and 'foreign' boarders provide an insight into the ways 'imagined communities' create invisible boundaries within shared space.<sup>44</sup> Discussing Woolf's *The Years* (1937), I suggest that the boarding house was a way of both containing the outsider and forcing the inhabitants' confrontations with the 'other'.

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<sup>44</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

**Chapter 1**  
**Reading the Room: The Interior Space of the Boarding House in Dorothy Richardson, Storm Jameson, Lettice Cooper, and E. H. Young**

‘The influence of houses on their inhabitants might well be the subject of a scientific investigation. Those curious contraptions of stones or bricks, with all their peculiar adjuncts, trimmings, and furniture, their specific immutable shapes, their intense and inspissated atmosphere, in which our lives are entangled as completely as our souls in our bodies – what powers do they not wield over us, what subtle and pervasive effects upon the whole substance of our existence may not be theirs?’

Lytton Strachey<sup>45</sup>

This chapter traces the historical emergence of the boarding house as a living space for women, alongside different theoretical concepts of interior space, in order to develop an approach to analysing the relationship between the individual and the architectural and social space they inhabit. Taking up Gaston Bachelard’s suggestion in *The Poetics of Space* that we ‘read a room’ (PS 14), I will examine the stories these interiors tell of a particular way of life for women in the nineteen thirties. Although the focus of this thesis is on the nineteen thirties, the literature of the boarding house can only be read by locating it in a wider historical context, this chapter will cover the history of women’s lodging from the end of the nineteenth century to the interwar period.

The debates surrounding ideas of home, privacy, domesticity and respectability that are considered in this opening chapter are central themes in relation to the boarding house to which I return throughout the thesis in order to reflect on what the boarding house room ultimately came to represent in social, cultural, and economic terms.

### **1.1 The Private Home: Interior Space and Interiority**

The connection between interiority and interior space can be traced through the changing usage of the word ‘interior’. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘interior’ as

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<sup>45</sup> Lytton Strachey, *Lytton Strachey by Himself: A Self-Portrait*, ed. by Michael Holroyd (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 16.

‘belonging to or connected with the inside’ and cites references used in relation to inner nature or inward mind as early as the sixteenth century, but it is not until the early nineteenth century that interior is used to refer to the inside of a building or room.<sup>46</sup> The etymology is similar in French, where the word *intérieur* was originally used primarily to refer to a person’s inner life and, as Michelle Perrot has pointed out in her history of private life, it was not until the nineteenth century that the word ‘referred not so much to the heart of man as to the heart of the household’.<sup>47</sup>

This shift in meaning corresponds to the changing nature of the home from physical shelter to emotional haven. Amanda Vickery has described how, between 1500 and 1800, the family was transformed ‘from an economic institution that suppressed the individual, to an introspective emotional unit built around children’ and how these changes became ‘inscribed in the fabric of houses, in the introduction of small rooms for withdrawal and solitude, and the provision of corridors and multiple staircases to separate personal quarters from circulating traffic’.<sup>48</sup>

This domestic ideal emerged with industrial modernity, the rise of individualism, and the need for individuals to establish their privacy through interior space. Walter Benjamin highlighted this in his ‘Exposé of 1935’ where he made his well-known observation that in the early nineteenth century: ‘the private individual makes his entrance on the stage of history’.<sup>49</sup> Privacy was enabled through the demarcation of boundaries between the private dwelling and the place of work, thus the formation of the domestic

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<sup>46</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, < <http://www.oed.com> > [accessed 3 April 2011]

<sup>47</sup> Michelle Perrot, ‘At Home’, in *A History of Private Life IV: From the Fires of Revolution to the Great War*, ed. by Michelle Perrot, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 341-57 (p. 343).

<sup>48</sup> Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 26.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Exposé of 1935’ in *The Arcades Project*, by Walter Benjamin, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 3-13 (p. 8).

interior was intrinsically linked to the construction of identity and the consolidation of gender roles within domestic life.<sup>50</sup>

It has been estimated that there were just over two and a half million people in Great Britain who could be classified as middle-class in 1851, and this number more than trebled to just over nine million by 1901.<sup>51</sup> Possessions became a way for the members of this expanded class to differentiate themselves and, despite ninety per cent of all houses in England being rented up until the beginning of the twentieth century the family house became another visible display of status.<sup>52</sup> Deborah Cohen has suggested that rented homes had more flexibility as status indicators because they could simply be ‘exchanged for better accommodation as fortunes allowed’.<sup>53</sup>

As domestic space became a way of creating and representing the individual, so the two meanings of the word interior became linked in the conflation of the interior space of the home with that of the interiorised self. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin extended this fusion of self and place by suggesting that the nineteenth-century individual became physically embedded in their interior space:

The nineteenth century, like no other century, was addicted to dwelling. It conceived the residence as a receptacle for the person, and it encased him with all his appurtenances so deeply in the dwelling’s interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet.<sup>54</sup>

The collector mentality of the nineteenth-century dweller who gathered multiple objects to reassure themselves of their existence, and to cement that existence within their dwelling, was accentuated by a taste for furnishings that enabled individuals to imprint

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<sup>50</sup> Charles Rice, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 2-3.

<sup>51</sup> John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London and New York: Longman, 1994), pp. 24-5.

<sup>52</sup> Stefan Muthesius, *The English Terraced House* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 17.

<sup>53</sup> Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), p. xi.

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, ‘Convolute I: The Interior’ (I4,4), p. 220.

themselves bodily upon the spaces they inhabited: 'To dwell means to leave traces'.<sup>55</sup> Benjamin's descriptions referred to a domestic interior that was itself not only contained and static, but that also contained and stilled the individual.

This containment of the individual to which Benjamin referred is gendered, particularly for middle-class women where the home has long been viewed as a container 'a doll's house, a gilded cage, a suffocating prison'.<sup>56</sup> In her criticism of Benjamin's description of the nineteenth-century bourgeois interior, Laura Mulvey has argued that Benjamin does not recognise the importance of women for ensuring the stability and privacy of the family home:

Benjamin does not mention the fact that the private sphere, the domestic, is an essential adjunct to the bourgeois marriage and is thus associated with woman, not simply as female, but as wife and mother. It is the mother who guarantees the privacy of the home by maintaining its respectability, as essential a defence against outside incursion or curiosity as the encompassing walls of the home itself.<sup>57</sup>

However, the establishment of the boundaries of the middle-class home was primarily concerned with consolidating male privacy. The woman, in her role of domestic 'Angel of the House', was responsible for the privacy of the home, and derived a certain amount of protection from the outside world through the privacy of the family home, but she was not the main beneficiary of this arrangement. The paradox of privacy, as Wendy Gan has recently observed, was that 'it was the privacy of the family, not of women within the family, that was usually emphasized'.<sup>58</sup> Although in the nineteenth century, women of the middle and upper classes were expected to retreat from the public into the private sphere, within the home they were not encouraged to withdraw further into private rooms of their own.

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 'Exposé of 1935', p. 9.

<sup>56</sup> Vickery, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> Gan, p. 5.

In 1922, recalling his childhood home in London at 69 Lancaster Gate, Lytton Strachey observed that his father ‘was the only person to have a sitting-room to himself’.<sup>59</sup> The Strachey’s were a large family, Lytton was the eleventh of thirteen children, and space and privacy within the house was limited. In his essay ‘Lancaster Gate’, written fifteen years after the family had moved out, Strachey reflects on the privacy afforded the female members of the family. His four sisters shared what he refers to as a ‘young ladies’ room’:

privacy there, I suppose occasionally there must have been, but privacy arranged, studied and highly precarious. But, strangest of all, my mother had no room of her own. There was a large writing-table in the dining-room, and at that writing-table, amid the incessant *va-et-vient* of a large family, my mother did all her business.<sup>60</sup>

That Strachey found it strange that his mother did not enjoy the privacy of a room of her own indicates the shifting perceptions of home that occurred between the nineteenth century and the interwar period. In *avant-garde* circles, such as the loose cluster of friends known as The Bloomsbury Group to which Strachey belonged, an alternative domesticity was being championed; the group were, Christopher Reed has observed, ‘united by an alienation from the traditional home’.<sup>61</sup> In 1904 after the death of their father, Leslie Stephen, the young Virginia and Vanessa Stephen escaped from the oppressive domesticity of Hyde Park Gate, South Kensington to 46 Gordon Square, Bloomsbury. The change in their geographical location symbolised their intentions to start a life that would offer alternative ways of living. Virginia Woolf described that time:

We were full of experiments and reforms. We were going to do without table napkins, we were to have Bromo instead; we were going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o’clock. Everything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial.<sup>62</sup>

This act of disrupting the domestic norms of her Victorian childhood home, ‘to paint; to write’, makes the connection between material space and creativity, a theme to which

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<sup>59</sup> Strachey, *Lytton Strachey by Himself*, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Strachey, *Lytton Strachey by Himself*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>61</sup> Reed, p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 207.

Woolf would return in her later essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). These alternative living arrangements would only have provided freedom to some of the women inhabiting 46 Gordon Square; for the servants the same rituals and rules of behaviour of the Victorian household would still apply.

The private life symbolised by the nineteenth century bourgeois interior was already in decline at the time of Benjamin's writing; the permanence suggested by the contained and crowded interior of the nineteenth century had given way to a dominant perception that the twentieth-century world was one of transience. The movement away from domestic stability was noted by Virginia Woolf in her diary in September 1935 where she suggested that 'a house should be portable like a snail shell. In future perhaps people will flirt [*sic*] out houses like little fans; & go on. There'll be no settled life within walls'.<sup>63</sup> Benjamin argued that the twentieth century 'has put an end to dwelling in the old sense [...] dwelling has diminished: for the living, through hotel rooms; for the dead, through crematoriums'.<sup>64</sup>

Reflecting Benjamin's assertion that the twentieth century brought an 'end to dwelling', his Frankfurt School colleague, Theodor Adorno, stated in 1944 that 'Dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible'. In contrast to the nineteenth-century vision of the interior as a protective casing for the individual and an extension of the self, Adorno defined modern living spaces as 'living-cases' that are 'devoid of all relation to the occupant'.<sup>65</sup> This concept will recur in the literature of the boarding house: in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), George Orwell describes the London boarding house world of the 1930s as, 'Mile after mile of mean lonely houses, let off in flats and single rooms; not homes, not communities, just clusters of meaningless lives drifting in a sort of drowsy

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<sup>63</sup> Virginia Woolf, '12 September 1935', in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV: 1931-1935*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 340.

<sup>64</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 'Convolute I: The Interior' (14,4), p. 221.

<sup>65</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: NLB, 1974), p. 38.

chaos to the grave!’<sup>66</sup> The dominant perception of these spaces as utilitarian and impersonal, and the idea that they are ‘not homes’, is one that was to endure in both literary and historical accounts.

Benjamin was referring to the bourgeois interiors of Paris, where the apartment rather than the house dominated domestic architecture. In 1911, only around three per cent of dwellings in England and Wales were purpose-built flats, the majority were single houses arranged in rows.<sup>67</sup> However, the exterior appearance could be deceptive, sub-letting was common and spare rooms were frequently let to single lodgers, particularly in London where two-fifths of all families shared a house.<sup>68</sup> In a paper ‘On Middle-Class Houses’ given to the Royal Institute of British Architects in November 1877, William H. White suggested that architects should build apartments along Parisian lines in London since within central London ‘the great mass of the residents are lodgers. The neighbourhood of the Strand is almost entirely rented by tenants and sub-tenants, who occupy a storey, a set of rooms, or a single room’. Within these lodging houses, White argues, ‘the different groups [of people] are all day and hourly encountering each other’ as lodgers are often forced to walk through the room of another tenant in order to access their own accommodation.<sup>69</sup>

In the 1801 Census, the population of England and Wales was 8,892,536 and by 1901 it was more than treble that at 32,527,843.<sup>70</sup> This increase, concentrated primarily in the towns and cities, led to overcrowding and a severe strain on the already limited housing resources: in 1801 there were 2,073,435 people living in London and Greater

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<sup>66</sup> George Orwell, ‘Keep the Aspidistra Flying’, in *The Complete Novels*, by George Orwell (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 629.

<sup>67</sup> Muthesius, *The English Terraced House*, p. 1.

<sup>68</sup> Donald J. Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 92.

<sup>69</sup> William H. White, ‘On Middle-Class Houses in Paris and Central London’, in *Royal Institute of British Architects: Sessional Papers, 1877-78* (London: Royal Institute of British Architects, 1878), pp. 21-54 (pp. 29-30).

<sup>70</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables*, p.3.

London and this had increased to 11,117,943 by 1901.<sup>71</sup> As the labouring classes increased in numbers, many of the more prosperous town dwellers vacated their large homes and moved to the suburbs and more fashionable districts. This enabled the middle classes to inhabit 'a still more self-enclosed household space' in the form of detached or semi-detached housing that 'offered the promise of walls surrounded on at least three sides by the pleasures of a garden'.<sup>72</sup>

The physical distance between these new houses and the urban sprawl enhanced the occupants' sense of privacy. It was an expanse that could be traversed easily with the development of the metropolitan railway that enabled the middle-classes to commute into the city for work, keeping the privacy of their home life geographically separate. Their abandoned town houses were left to be subdivided by landlords, as multiple occupancy became the solution to the increasing urban population and the shortage of domestic housing. This often resulted in individual rooms filled to capacity with two or more families, David Englander has vividly described the conditions that prevailed: 'workers and their families were packed, layered, and compressed like sardines into the made-down houses of the wealthy, forsaken by their original inhabitants for the safety of the suburbs'.<sup>73</sup> Although the privacy of the individual family home may have been the ideal for the middle and the upper classes, it was often not the reality for the working and lower-middle classes.

### **Growth of Boarding and Lodging**

The growth of boarding and lodging at the end of the nineteenth century indicates the shift to an increasingly urban and mobile population. By the late nineteenth and early

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<sup>71</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables*, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Karen Chase and Michael Levenson, 'On the Parapets of Privacy', in *A Companion to Victorian Literature and Culture*, ed. by Herbert F. Tucker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 425- 37, (p. 435).

<sup>73</sup> David Englander, *Landlord and Tenant in Urban Britain 1838-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), p. x.

twentieth century, as towns and cities continued to expand without additional housing provision ‘whole streets and districts of once genteel family homes became “rooming house” and common lodging house areas’.<sup>74</sup>

Numbers of lodgers and boarders are difficult to calculate due to the difficulties in defining them in the Census, often they did not appear on the electoral register, as many were not eligible to vote.<sup>75</sup> In 1868 there were only fourteen thousand lodgers on the electoral register, but the total number of lodgers in metropolitan boroughs was estimated at between two and three hundred thousand.<sup>76</sup>

Boarders and lodgers inhabited hotels, hostels, boarding and lodging houses, or took rooms in private houses. By the end of the nineteenth century, many rented flats or bed-sitting rooms in converted houses or purpose built blocks. Within these broad definitions there were various distinctions: generally hotels would take those wanting a room for a few nights only, while in the average boarding house the residents were ‘in the main of a permanent type’.<sup>77</sup> Establishments in the cities catered for more long-term residents than those in the seaside towns who would have seasonal fluctuations in their clientele.

At the bottom of the scale were common lodging houses, an institution in nineteenth-century English towns and cities. They catered for the very poor and the itinerant population and were, for many, the last resort before the casual ward of the workhouse. Associated with dirt, disease, and immorality, the reputation of the common lodging house was not a positive one: Friedrich Engels described them as ‘hot-beds of

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<sup>74</sup> Alison Ravetz and Richard Turkington, *The Place of Home: English Domestic Environments, 1914-2000* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1995), p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> Before 1918 lodgers were required to have lived at the same address for twelve months, and to pay £10 or more per year for their lodgings before they qualified to vote. See British Parliamentary Papers, *Representation of the People. A bill [as amended in committee] further to amend the laws relating to the representation of the people in England and Wales, 1867 (237) V.547*, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Seymour, *Electoral Reform in England and Wales: The Development and Operation of the Parliamentary Franchise, 1832-1885* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915), p. 364.

<sup>77</sup> S. W. W., *Hotel and Boarding House Management for Small Establishments* (London: Blandford Press, 1935), p. 48.

unnatural vice'.<sup>78</sup> The Common Lodging Houses Act, 1851 forced authorities to register and regulate the lodging houses in their jurisdiction and required that within the house the sleeping accommodation of men and women was to be segregated. In his social history of housing, John Burnett has pointed to the difficulty in administering the Lodging Houses Act due to the range of lodging accommodation available at the time 'which ranged from filthy, overcrowded thieves' dens and "twopenny brothels" at the bottom to reasonably comfortable boarding-houses for artisans, commercial travellers, clerks and students at the top'.<sup>79</sup>

The philanthropist and social researcher Charles Booth cited an 1889 report by the Chief Commissioner of Police that recorded exactly one thousand common lodging houses registered in London, with a capacity of 31,651 lodgers. However, many lodging houses would not have been registered. Booth declared that the female-only common lodging houses 'would appear to be almost entirely occupied by women of the lowest class – thieves, prostitutes, and beggars, with a very small proportion of casual earners such as crossing-sweepers, basket-hawkers, charwomen, and, in the Notting Hill district, washerwomen'.<sup>80</sup>

Many boarding and lodging house proprietors did not run professional establishments; they took a few boarders into their family home and Elizabeth Roberts has noted that this made it

very difficult, even from oral evidence, to estimate how many families made money from taking in lodgers. Many families had relatives living with them. Some of these were looked after for no financial return; others undoubtedly paid their way; and this kind of lodger was much more usual than taking in strangers. [...] Sharing a room or a bed with a relative was acceptable, indeed usual, but

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<sup>78</sup> Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. and ed. by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 78.

<sup>79</sup> John Burnett, *A Social History of Housing: 1815-1970*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen & Co, 1986), p. 63.

<sup>80</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People In London*, First Series: Poverty, Vol. 1 (5 vols) (London: Macmillan, 1902), pp. 207, 212.

such familiarity with strangers was not. Usually landladies were widows with no family living at home.<sup>81</sup>

In the most detailed historical study of boarding and lodging in nineteenth- and twentieth-century England to date, Leonore Davidoff has outlined how perceptions of boarding and lodging changed significantly in the nineteenth century when privacy was increasingly valued and the sharing of a house with lodgers implied the family could not afford to keep themselves private.<sup>82</sup> Particularly if the boarders were female and the woman was a widow or spinster, she ran the risk of her respectable attempt at financial independence being labelled a brothel. This association is frequently alluded to in popular fictional accounts. In Annie Bradshaw's *Murder At The Boarding House: A Detective Story Founded Upon Fact* (1936), the landlady of the Bloomsbury boarding house where the murder has taken place defends the respectability of her house: "'Tisn't a bawdy house, where casuals can come and go as they please. Why, I'm as particular as if it might be the Carlton, or the Ritz, and well my lodgers know it too. Never let a room for shorter than a month'.<sup>83</sup> That her rooms are let for at least a month at a time also elevates the status of her establishment from the casual accommodation available in the common lodging house.

Respectability was assumed through the private family home and was not associated with the commercial enterprise of boarding and lodging. This is highlighted in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates about lodging houses for women that will be discussed later in this chapter, in which there are repeated references to the respectability of both the lodging house and the lodger.

Changes in use and perception of lived urban spaces are significant indicators of wider cultural and social shifts. The boarding houses and hotels that were created out of

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<sup>81</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890-1940* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 141.

<sup>82</sup> Davidoff, 'The Separation of Home and Work', p. 69.

<sup>83</sup> Annie Bradshaw, *Murder At The Boarding House: A Detective Story Founded Upon Fact* (London: Philip Allan, 1936), p. 27.

the adaptation of the large houses of the nineteenth century represent not only the historical passing of the bourgeois interior, but also the creation of a new form of interior within that same architectural space. ‘The Englishman’s Home is Only a Turret These Days’ was the subtitle of an article in the *Daily Express* on October 10, 1930 that described and lamented the new phenomenon of subdividing large family homes: ‘For the last five years hardly a day has passed without the old owners of London’s big houses moving out, driven by taxes, and the new owners, living in one-twelfth of the space each, moving in’.<sup>84</sup> Donald Olsen has pointed out that the houses occupied by Londoners were so remarkably standardized, ‘two rooms per floor with staircase and hall to one side’, that they were easily converted:

No structural alternations whatever were required to turn it into a lodging house or private hotel, and only comparatively few (this mostly in the twentieth century) to convert each floor into a self-contained flat or any two into a “maisonette”. Knocking holes into party walls could join two or more adjacent houses to create a larger hotel or larger flats.<sup>85</sup>

The romance novelist Dorothy Black, writing under the pen name of Peter Delius, gives a remarkably similar description in her 1935 novel *Boarding House*, where a character starts his hotel business the ‘Mansions’ with one ‘carved up’ house: ‘The following year he took the house next door. Now the Mansions stretched half-way down the street, house joined to house with knocked-in walls and communicating passages in a positive labyrinth’.<sup>86</sup> The area is not named, but it could be either Bloomsbury or South Kensington, which were well-known areas for boarding and lodging houses as well as guesthouses and hotels at the time.

Respectability was mapped onto the geographical location of the boarding house; in Bloomsbury many houses had been converted to lodging houses and private hotels ‘of

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<sup>84</sup> Emrys Jones, ‘Bedsit Kitch: The Englishman’s Home is Only a Turret These Days’, *Daily Express*, 10 October 1930, p. 10.

<sup>85</sup> Olsen, *City as a Work of Art*, p. 93.

<sup>86</sup> Peter Delius, *Boarding House* (London: Lovat Dickson & Thompson Ltd, 1935), p. 12.

the most discreet and respectable sort'.<sup>87</sup> In a recent article on the literary places of Bloomsbury, Sara Blair has noted that:

For single women in particular, the vestigial aura of respectability made it socially possible to dine and board independently in the mushrooming Bloomsbury lodgings catering to their needs.<sup>88</sup>

However, while the squares and central streets of Bloomsbury maintained a 'precarious gentility', Olsen cited an 1876 article in the *Architect*, which reported that the minor streets and borders of the area were 'almost wholly given up to a poor class of lodging-house keepers'. More affluent areas for hotels and 'the better class of lodging house' included Mayfair and St James, which by the 1890s were no longer solely occupied by wealthy families in individual houses.<sup>89</sup>

### ***An Interior Pilgrimage***

An early example of the boarding house genre in literature is Dorothy Richardson's series of thirteen novels, *Pilgrimage* (1915-1967), which also provides the richest incidence of the conflation between self and dwelling space through its literary construction. Richardson's work is an example of the modernist narrative technique that came to be termed 'stream of consciousness'; her text is constructed entirely through the interiority of her central protagonist Miriam Henderson, reflecting her character's thoughts and feelings through a continuous flow that shifts between interior monologue and free indirect discourse in an attempt to produce a realistic representation of the workings of the mind's consciousness.

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<sup>87</sup> Olsen, *City as a Work of Art*, p. 136.

<sup>88</sup> Sara Blair, 'Local Modernity, Global Modernism: Bloomsbury and the Places of the Literary' in *English Literary History*, 71 (2004), 813-38 (p. 820).

<sup>89</sup> Donald J. Olsen, *The Growth of Victorian London* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1976), pp. 130, 83.

*Pilgrimage* begins in the 1890s and extends through to the early years of the twentieth century. It follows the life and psychological development of Miriam who, at the age of seventeen, is forced out of her secure middle-class home by the bankruptcy of her father and the mental collapse of her mother. In the first three volumes, Miriam secures employment that provides accommodation, first as a teacher and then as a governess, both standard occupations for the impoverished genteel woman in the 1890s.

At the start of the fourth volume, *The Tunnel* (1919), Miriam is twenty-one, has taken a position as a dental secretary and moved to a single room in Mrs Bailey's lodging house in Tansley Street, Bloomsbury. Lodging was primarily seen as the realm of the bachelor male without family responsibilities and in the nineteenth century there were usually around two or three male lodgers for every female lodger.<sup>90</sup> However, by the final decades of the nineteenth century, new employment opportunities for women in urban areas increased the numbers of single women moving to towns and cities in search of work and in need of accommodation.

Technological innovations such as the typewriter, the telephone and a burgeoning services sector contributed to a changing labour market at the end of the nineteenth century and increased female participation in work outside the home. This resulted in an influx of single women to the cities, particularly London, to take up employment opportunities in these new fields of work as secretaries, clerical workers, and sales assistants. Between 1861 and 1911 female clerical workers in London increased from 279 to 569,850.<sup>91</sup> There were around five million women workers at the beginning of the twentieth century making up twenty-nine per cent of the total workforce.<sup>92</sup> This growing

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<sup>90</sup> Davidoff, 'Separation of Home and Work', p. 79.

<sup>91</sup> Jane Lewis, 'Women Clerical Workers in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', in *The White-Blouse Revolution: Female Office Workers Since 1870*, ed. by Gregory Anderson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 27-47 (p. 34).

<sup>92</sup> Craig Lindsay, 'A Century of Labour Market Change: 1900 to 2000', *Office of National Statistics Labour Market Trends*, 111 (2003), 133-44 (p. 138).

community of working women necessitated a corresponding increase in temporary accommodation.

Published between 1919 and 1935, the *Pilgrimage* books that detail Miriam's London life see Miriam embracing her independent life in lodgings. At the end of *The Tunnel* (1919), Mrs Bailey converts the house from a lodging to a boarding house. The meaning of the term 'boarder' can be traced in Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of 1755, where 'board' originally meant 'table'; thus, a boarder was 'a tabler,' one who lives in the house of another and shares their table. A lodger, however, is one who 'lives in rooms in the house of another' without the provision of food. Another key distinction is that a lodging is a 'temporary habitation'.<sup>93</sup> These definitions also serve to differentiate the boarder from the hotel guest. In a 1934 publication, *Hotel and Boarding House Law and Practical Hotel Management*, J. Ford outlined the distinguishing features of the 'boarder' as 'one who is entertained under special arrangement or contract and provided with rooms and meals', they are different to the 'guest' that one would find in a hotel who stays 'for some uncertain period from day to day'.<sup>94</sup>

The transformation in status of Mrs Bailey's lodgings to a boarding house is significant for giving both Miriam and her landlady a sense of long-term stability, and it also raises the status of the house, aligning it with behaviours associated with a private household and distinguishing it from the common lodging house. Richardson indicates it is Mrs Bailey's maternal concern that has prompted the change: Mrs Bailey feels it will give her daughters a better chance of marrying because the boarders will be living with the family and sharing their table; her daughters will therefore be able to integrate with the boarders in the new communal dining-room and sitting area, rather than 'living in the kitchen and seeing nobody' (II, 286).

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<sup>93</sup> Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of The English Language 1755*, Cambridge University Press, [accessed 16 August 2011] [on CD-ROM].

<sup>94</sup> J. Ford, *Hotel and Boarding House Law and Practical Hotel Management: The Liabilities and Rights of the Innkeeper and Boarding House Proprietor* (Leicester: Rippin's Books, 1934), p. 4.

While the lodger is confined to a single room and often required to be self-sufficient, the boarder has greater inclusion within the household through the provision of meals and a greater spatial mobility within the house, allowing them to ‘come and go and go up and downstairs from their bedrooms to th[e] dining-room’ (II, 325). The opening up of these previously private spaces creates a new space for the boarders, a social space in between the private room and the public street.

In *Interim* (1919), the fifth book, Richardson elaborates on how this shift in status also creates a change in the materiality of the house: it becomes more permeable. As a lodging house ‘its huge high thick walls held all the lodgers secure and apart, fixed in richly enclosed rooms in the heart of London’ (II, 77). However, as a boarding house ‘it lay open and bleak, all its rooms naked and visible’ (II, 324). Miriam has established her freedom in that separate life, being alone in the house and seeing nobody. Having other people visible in the house takes away Miriam’s illusion that she occupies a private space in her ‘enclosed’ room. There is a sense of loss of privacy that was a common theme in writing about the communal life in the boarding house, as the inhabitants’ lives were often exposed and visible to the other boarders. Writing a diary as part of the Mass Observation exercise, Miss Ditmas, an office worker living in a boarding house in Gordon Square, recorded an account of her day on 12 August 1937 that included: ‘Meet fellow-boarder in hall. Guess by her action that she has just read someone else’s postcard!’<sup>95</sup>

Attempting to gain greater independence, Miriam moves from Mrs Bailey’s boarding house in book eight, *The Trap* (1925), to share dingy lodgings with another woman, Selina Holland. Richardson makes the important distinction that although the two women have a flat of their own and live independently from their landlord, Miriam has lost that important symbol of her freedom, a ‘room of one’s own’, as she must share a bedroom with Miss Holland. With this shift to shared space Richardson demonstrates how

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<sup>95</sup> Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex), DS049 Day Survey, 12 August 1937.

Miriam's independence and sense of identity is bound up spatially in the room, as Miriam insists on a dividing curtain to 'hang between her and Miss Holland's cheerless things' (III, 404).

### **Thresholds**

In the tenth and eleventh books, *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931) and *Clear Horizon* (1935), Miriam, now in her early thirties, leaves Flaxman's Court and returns once again to Mrs Bailey's boarding house. Miriam's absence has given her a new appreciation of her 'one small, narrow room', and its relationship to the rest of the 'high, spacious house whose every staircase she knew and loved' (IV, 194). Previously Miriam had on occasion found her single room at Mrs Bailey's becoming claustrophobic, 'a cell of torturing mocking memories and apprehensions', forcing her into the communal spaces of the other boarders with their 'dreadful voices' and 'unchanging words' (III, 31). But after her experience of the 'perpetual confrontations of Flaxman life' (IV, 194), Mrs Bailey's boarding house offers a restorative space for Miriam, where she is able to reconcile her need for privacy with her occasional need for engagement with the wider household. For Miriam, a private space is a necessary requirement in order to have 'Freedom for thought' (IV, 196), and having been deprived of that seclusion she now embraces fully the 'return to a solitude that whenever she crossed the threshold of her empty room ceased to be a solitude' (IV, 201).

When reading a room, the representations of windows and doors in a text imply a relationship between the interiority of the individual and what lies outside, both in terms of interior and exterior space. One only has to think of the metaphors 'window into the mind' or 'doorway to the soul' that make such a connection. Thresholds take on a greater significance in places that can be described as existing on the border between two different types of space, such as the boarding house.

Doors define privacy in allowing or restricting access to certain places. These thresholds are not only the boundaries between interior and exterior, but in a boarding house they demarcate space within space; in particular, those communal spaces such as halls, staircases, and shared dining and sitting-rooms that blur the distinctions between private and public or social space. The importance of doors to Miriam is emphasised in *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931) by her detailed memory of each door in Mrs Bailey's boarding house. Recalled from the distance of her lodgings in Flaxman's Court, Miriam's mind daydreams a detailed acoustic topography of the doors in the building. These are the doors that she hears opening and closing from her own room and has learnt to distinguish each one by the precise noises they make: 'the sound of each of the Tansley Street doors came back at once, and some stood out clearly from the others' (IV, 195).

This scene clearly links Miriam's own interiority with the realism of an early twentieth-century boarding house interior by giving the distinguishing features of the layout as well as Miriam's response to them. The noise the doors make on closing is determined by their solidity and the floor covering within the room, signifiers that also indicate the price of the room, from the state bedroom 'whose door moved discreetly on its hinges over a fairly thickish carpet' to 'the heavy brown doors of the second-floor bedrooms' which close 'leisurely and importantly, seeming to demand the respect due to the prices of the rooms they guarded'. On the floor above the 'yellow, varnished doors' seem more insubstantial closing 'lightly and quickly,' with the rattle from the door handles 'echoing over the linoleum-covered stairs and landing of the upper floors', the move from carpet to linoleum reflecting the lower prices of the rooms higher up the house (IV, 195).

Being able to hear the echo on the linoleum indicates Miriam's spatial perspective in these recollections: from her top floor room she hears these doors opening and closing, they are not doors that she opens or closes herself. The acts of opening or closing doors,

Bachelard argues are: ‘The gestures that make us conscious of security or freedom [and they] are rooted in a profound depth of being’ (PS 224).

Richardson details how Miriam had to learn in her early years at Mrs Bailey’s to enjoy the freedom of greater spatial mobility offered by the house. In a comment about her landlady made to another boarder in the sixth book *Deadlock* (1921), Miriam had explained: ‘You see she lets me be amphibious [...] I’m neither a lodger nor a boarder’ (III, 81). The difference is that Miriam had worked for, rather than paid for, the extra advantages of being a boarder. By giving French lessons to Mrs Bailey’s daughter Sissie, Miriam earns the provision of a meal and access to these communal spaces. The use of the descriptor ‘amphibious’, a deliberate malapropism of amorphous by Richardson, is indicative of the associations Miriam makes with her room as an island of stability and the rest of the boarding house as the changing and uncertain sea. By being amphibious Miriam is able to exist on these thresholds between inside and outside her room, between private and communal space, and the thresholds between lodger and boarder.

### **Dwelling, Thinking**

Richardson’s narrative technique of presenting Miriam’s life exclusively through her character’s thoughts means that the spaces Miriam inhabits are always mediated through that same unique interiority. Heidegger argues that there is a relationship between an individual’s place of dwelling and their experience of ‘being’ in the world in his lecture of 1951, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, where he asks ‘What is it to dwell?’<sup>96</sup> An individual, he argues, can inhabit a place without dwelling there: ‘These buildings house man. He inhabits them and yet does not dwell in them’ (BDT 145). Heidegger traces the meaning of dwelling through the etymology of the Old English and High German word

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<sup>96</sup> Martin Heidegger, ‘Building Dwelling Thinking’, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Heidegger. Subsequent references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with BDT.

for building, *buan*, which means to dwell ‘This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place’ (BDT 146). To dwell is thus to seek a stable place in the world and a fixed location. More precisely Heidegger defines it as ‘to remain in peace’ (BDT 149), encompassing the feelings of security and protection that dwelling in such a location provides.

Dwelling, for Heidegger, does not refer only to the experience of living somewhere, it is a fundamental dimension of existence, Heidegger equates the word *bauen* (build) with the word *bin* in *ich bin* (I am), arguing that to dwell is to locate one’s very being in the world: ‘man *is* insofar as he *dwells*’ (BDT 147). Dwelling is thus the very activity of being human: ‘To be a human being means [...] to dwell’ (BDT 147).

In her room Miriam feels ‘[i]n the house, but not, too much, of it. Supported and screened by the presence of the many rooms that made the large house’ (IV, 195). Her room is cocooned within the house, but still detached enough to provide her with privacy. Richardson contrasts the representation of Miriam being ‘screened’ by the supportive enclosure of the other rooms, with Miriam’s earlier experience of being made ‘visible’ by the presence of the other boarders in order to show how Miriam’s perceptions of her living space have developed.

Humans have a relationship with the places in which they reside; there are acts of creation and cultivation in the production of a dwelling. Building is not only the construction of the physical structure through bricks and mortar, but also the creation of a home within that structure through the process of dwelling within it and making it part of the self, hence Heidegger’s assertion that ‘building is really dwelling’ (BDT 148). In *Pilgrimage*, Richardson describes how, by creating a mental space, Miriam has built herself into her dwelling and how her consciousness is able to grow within it, becoming part of the materiality of Mrs Bailey’s house: in ‘every room, where, extending even into those she had never entered, richly her own life was stored up’ (IV, 194). Space, in Heidegger’s conception, is ‘something that has been made room for’, something that is

created by its location and through the experience of dwelling: ‘spaces receive their being from locations’ (BDT 154). Miriam’s living space has taken on what Elisabeth Bronfen has termed an ‘existential significance’ to her psychic life, the two becoming vitally connected:<sup>97</sup>

Once more her room held quietude secure [...] Her being sank, perceptibly, back and back into a centre wherein it was held poised and sensitive to every sound and scent, and to the play of light on any and every object in the room (IV, 363).

Miriam’s ‘being’ has become located within the space of the room and is held ‘secure’ within its interior boundaries. However, although Heidegger can offer an insight into one way of reading the relationship between Miriam’s interiority and the interior space of her room, there is another dimension of dwelling that is not considered here, for Miriam is not only creating her space, her space is also creating her.

In his essay ‘Experience and Poverty’ (1933), Benjamin observed that ‘the intérieur forces the inhabitant to adopt the greatest possible number of habits – habits that do more justice to the interior he is living in than to himself’, so the individual is often required to adapt to their surroundings not always in a way that they would choose.<sup>98</sup> These habits insinuate themselves within the self. Describing the term interiority, Carolyn Steedman has proposed that it is ‘a visceral sense of insideness [...] an interiorised selfhood’.<sup>99</sup> The ‘visceral’ suggests soft inner parts that can receive outside traces like the velvet folds of Benjamin’s compass case. These traces take the form of external experiences that imprint themselves as memories and behaviours on the interior of the self just as heavily as the body’s physical exterior imprints itself on the furnishings of a room. The problematic aspect of Heidegger’s argument is that it assumes that space

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<sup>97</sup> Elisabeth Bronfen, *Dorothy Richardson’s Art of Memory: Space, Identity, Text*, trans. by Victoria Appelbee (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Experience and Poverty’ (1933), in *Selected Writings: Vol. 2, 1927-1934*, by Walter Benjamin, ed. by Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, trans. by Rodney Livingstone and others, (Cambridge, MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 731-36 (p. 734).

<sup>99</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* (London: Virago Press, 1995), p. xi.

can only be created from a single perspective and that it must be a static space. Not only is Mrs Bailey's boarding house a temporary space of residence, Miriam's identity within the house is also neither fixed nor stable. Instead, there is a more fluid and shifting relationship between Miriam and her accommodation. Her method of creating and consolidating her self within her interior space indicates a reciprocal exchange between the interiority of Miriam's inner life and her physical surroundings. Heidegger's concept of dwelling is unable to conceive of a dwelling place as a space of movement that allows her 'being' constantly to evolve. To understand space as movement we must look to the theories of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau that will be discussed later in this chapter.

## 1.2 'Man Wants a Lodging, But Woman Wants a Home'<sup>100</sup>

Two objections that dominated debates about the dangers of boarding and lodging houses, particularly as spaces for women, were 'that they encouraged transience and discouraged domesticity'.<sup>101</sup> The quotation is from Gwendolyn Wright, and although it refers to nineteenth-century American boarding houses, it reflects the similar debates that were taking place in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Central to these debates was the tension between the space of the boarding house and that of the private home.

The late 1880s and 90s saw the building of residences in London offering bed-sitting room accommodation in shared blocks. However, as a writer in *The Englishwoman's Review* noted in 1900, 'the number of professional women in London, and especially in central London, increased very rapidly, [and] the supply of suitable

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<sup>100</sup> Christabel Osborn, 'Rowton Houses for Women', *Contemporary Review*, 99 (1911), 707-17 (p. 717).

<sup>101</sup> Gwendolyn Wright, *Building The Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), p. 38.

house-room naturally did not increase at anything like the same rate'.<sup>102</sup> Accommodation available for the professional woman included the Ladies' Residential Chambers on Chenies Street (built in 1888) and York Street (built in 1892) and Sloane Gardens House (built in 1889) that was run by the Ladies' Associated Dwellings Company. However, these were permanently crowded and had a long waiting list. They were also relatively expensive: the Chambers ranged in price from thirty to ninety pounds per year making it too expensive 'for all but the most prosperous of this class'. Sloane Gardens House was more affordable at ten shillings per week for an unfurnished room, compared to between eighteen and twenty-five shillings per week in a private ladies boarding house. In an article in *The Contemporary Review* in 1900, Alice Zimmern suggested that a woman would need to earn at least one pound per week to afford around fifteen shillings on board and lodging and suggests that: 'The lady who earns less presents a problem for the wages rather than the housing question', pointing to the significant difference that existed between the wages of men and women.<sup>103</sup>

For poorer women, there was a demand for 'accommodation on a smaller scale and at a cheaper rate' in the central renting districts of Bloomsbury and Marylebone.<sup>104</sup> Martha Vicinus has pointed out that 'small boardinghouses taken over by a philanthropic organization', were more common, although they catered mainly for young women under the age of thirty, thus 'encouraging women to think of work as a temporary state before marriage'.<sup>105</sup> It also suggested that the housing was filling a short-term need, and this was echoed by some organisations that provided accommodation for women on a daily or weekly basis only in order to ensure that it was not used permanently. One of the earliest providers of women's hostels was the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)

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<sup>102</sup> H. Reinherz, 'The Housing of the Educated Working Woman', *The Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions*, 31 (1900), 7-11 (p.7).

<sup>103</sup> Alice Zimmern, 'Ladies' Dwellings', *Contemporary Review*, 77 (1900), 96-104 (pp. 99, 100).

<sup>104</sup> Reinherz, p.7.

<sup>105</sup> Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 295-6.

founded in 1855. The Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) was another religious organisation founded in 1875 with the objective of uniting 'girls and women of the empire to uphold purity of thought, word and deed'. They had GFS hostels, referred to as lodges, in most of the large towns of England and their literature stated that 'Girls engaged in professions, industry, and business of all kinds are welcomed as boarders', but most lodges stipulated that the maximum stay was one month and they did not accept permanent residents.<sup>106</sup>

The Homes for Working Girls in London (HWGL), founded in 1878, provided longer-term accommodation and by 1905 had eight homes with provision for around 550 girls in hostels across London.<sup>107</sup> Like the YWCA and GFS it also enforced Christian practices on its inhabitants. Indeed, many of the homes catering for poorer women did not provide the same privacy and independence that was offered to professional women in the Ladies' Residential Chambers and Sloane Gardens House, and their many restrictions and regulations made them unpopular.<sup>108</sup>

The pressing need for affordable housing for women led to much discussion among reformers and commentators in the periodical press of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in those papers with a reputation for campaigning journalism such as *The Women's Penny Paper* and *The Englishwomen's Review*. Their concern was primarily centred on the poorest working women, the shop assistants, clerks, and typists, although later discussions suggested a need for more respectable housing for those women at the bottom of the social scale, the hawkers and charwomen, and those without work. In an interview published in the *Women's Penny Paper* in 1890, the philanthropist Agnes Beddoe outlined her concern for 'the large body of women workers earning only from five to ten shillings a week and who are yet trying upon that to lead

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<sup>106</sup> *A Word to Explain the GFS: What It Is, and What It Stands For*, Ref: 5GFS/05/15, Box 158 Mixed Leaflets, Archive and Museum Collection, The Women's Library, London.

<sup>107</sup> *Records of Homes for Business Girls in London, Earlier Homes for Working Girls in London (HWGL), 1832-1959* (Modern Records Centre Catalogue, University of Warwick), p. 2.

< <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/> > [accessed 28 August 2011]

<sup>108</sup> Vicinus, p. 296.

honest, respectable lives, and to keep up a decent appearance [...] and yet too poor to afford decent lodgings'.<sup>109</sup> Writing in *Hearth and Home* in 1899, Edith Guest argued that there were limited options for women earning more than that, for the working woman who earned from fifty to one hundred pounds per year accommodation 'must be so cheap as to be consequently unbearable to the woman of refinement'. The language of the supporters stressed the 'respectable lives' of the women concerned, their 'refinement', and the need for accommodation that would not 'devitalise and degrade her'.<sup>110</sup>

Morality and respectability were central concerns of Mary Higgs, another prominent campaigner for the provision of women's lodging houses. In order to understand women's reluctance to use the existing provision of lodging houses and to clarify why these establishments were failing to provide an adequate service she adopted the mimetic research techniques of Charles Booth and dressed as a tramp. Accompanied by a female companion, she visited workhouses and common lodging houses across England to experience the difficulties for herself. Higgs's research took place over several years from 1903, and in 1905 she privately printed a pamphlet, *Three Nights in Women's Lodging Houses*, which later became part a more detailed book of her covert visits, *Glimpses into the Abyss* (1906), that revealed the low standards of cleanliness: 'The floor was strewn with dirty paper, crumbs, and *debris*, and dirty sand' and Higgs spent a wakeful night plagued by bed bugs.<sup>111</sup>

However, of greater concern to Higgs than the physical dirt, was the moral decay she found in the lodging houses, arguing that these institutions, 'fostered immorality'.<sup>112</sup> In *Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker*, co-written with Edward Hayward in 1910, the authors highlighted the difficulty for working women in

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<sup>109</sup> Helena B. Temple, 'Interview: Mrs. Beddoe', *Women's Penny Paper*, 66 (1890), 157-8 (p. 157).

<sup>110</sup> Edith Guest, 'Passing Events', *Hearth & Home: An Illustrated Weekly Journal for Gentlewomen*, 427 (1899), 434 (p. 434).

<sup>111</sup> Mary Higgs, *Glimpses into the Abyss* (London: P.S. King and Son, 1906), p. 104.

<sup>112</sup> Higgs, *Glimpses into the Abyss*, p. 87.

finding somewhere to live, due to the lower wages received by women and the lack of adequate provision of affordable accommodation. They called for ‘respectable’ lodging houses for women to be available in all the large towns and cities at affordable prices, for if a woman has to resort to those currently provided ‘the result can only be disastrous for the more respectable women who find their way there’.<sup>113</sup>

Higgs’s campaigning as a result of her first hand observations led to the formation in 1909 of The National Association of Women’s Lodging-Homes, a philanthropic organisation intended to connect those interested in the provision of lodging houses for women and girls. Their emphasis was on the need for ‘respectable, cheap lodging-houses for women’.<sup>114</sup> On 17 May 1911, the Association held a National Conference on Lodging-House Accommodation for Women at the Guildhall, London, that was well-attended by representatives from a wide number of societies and public authorities. In her opening presidential address, the Duchess of Marlborough aligned the association with the goal ‘to bring about a higher and more moral standard of life in the young womanhood of this country’.<sup>115</sup>

In the public discussions that took place regarding the provision of lodging houses for women, even the supporters of such an initiative put forth concerns that hinged on assumptions about women’s natural inclination to domesticity and stressed the need to ensure that such accommodation was only temporary and never to replace the permanence of the family home. It reflected an anxiety voiced twenty years earlier by an anonymous writer in *The Englishwoman’s Review* in 1889, who questioned not only how the housing provision would meet the demand, but the type of housing that would be provided:

If it be the case that there are in our midst 4,800,000 women and girls supporting themselves, and in this number married women are not included, the consideration

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<sup>113</sup> Mary Higgs and Edward Hayward, *Where Shall She Live? The Homelessness of the Woman Worker* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1910), p. 71.

<sup>114</sup> *Report of The Proceedings of The National Conference on Lodging-House Accommodation for Women*, Guildhall, London, 17 May 1911 (London: P. S. King & Son, 1911), p. 5.

<sup>115</sup> *Report of The Proceedings of The National Conference*, p. 9.

how these persons are housed, many of them being without the abode which is usually considered to constitute a home, becomes a very interesting question.<sup>116</sup>

The author's final statement draws attention to the central concern of the debate over women's accommodation: the need for an 'abode which is usually considered to constitute a home'. The fear of what would happen to women if they are not able to exercise their 'natural instincts' for home making was summed up by Mrs Mackirdy, a member of the audience at the aforementioned National Conference. Mackirdy supported municipal lodging houses with the reservations that

Women cannot be dealt with exactly on the same lines as men because every woman has in her the instinct of home making – and her need of love is enormous. If her natural instincts are killed or stifled and love crushed out of her heart she is not only of less value to the community, but she often becomes a danger.<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between those who are supporting women's lodging houses and those who are opposing them, as opponents also based their arguments on what they perceived as fundamental differences between men and women and their housing needs: 'man wants a lodging, but woman wants a home', wrote Christabel Osborn in the *Contemporary Review* in June 1911 in an article against the proposition for Rowton Houses for women. Osborn was a staunch opponent of lodging houses for women; she argued that they encouraged 'a method of life not beneficial either to the inmates or to the community'. Her main objection was that away from the stabilising and moral influence of family life, women's behaviour would become lazy and immoral: in short, unregulated. Osborn declared the lodging house cultivated 'anti-social habits' and neglected 'the domestic, social and civic responsibilities which play so strong a part in the development of character'. The need to control women is couched in language of morality and the virtues of the private family home: 'No arguments can make

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<sup>116</sup> Anonymous, 'A Working women's Dwelling', *The Englishwoman's Review of Social and Industrial Questions*, 20 (1889), 337-42 (p. 337).

<sup>117</sup> *Report of The Proceedings of The National Conference*, p. 54.

it really desirable that these young women should go to lodging-houses, where they would be wholly uncontrolled from morning to night.’<sup>118</sup>

Mrs Bramwell Booth of the Salvation Army, who also spoke at the National Conference, held such strong views against women’s lodging houses that she started a campaign to force women in lodgings to either return home or enter domestic service: ‘Anything which tempts women away from their real home is, I am convinced, a danger’.<sup>119</sup> These methods suggest a subtext of class control, that if a woman cannot return to her own home, she should go to work in the home of a richer woman, a solution which would also serve to rectify the servant shortage of the period.

Despite the calls for municipal lodging houses for women, one never materialised. Emily Gee has recently noted that architectural plans were drawn up by London County Council, but were rejected due to ‘the requirement for such schemes to be self-sufficient, and the Secretary of State’s repeated disapproval’.<sup>120</sup>

The campaigning of the National Association of Women’s Lodging-Homes did result in the opening of the private ‘yet municipally minded’ Ada Lewis Lodging House in 1913 for working women, and encouraged the opening of other lodgings catering for the many women working as secretaries, clerks, and typists.<sup>121</sup> There were also women’s clubs that began to appear at the end of the nineteenth century. The Enterprise Club (founded in 1889) catered for city workers and was open until 8pm, offering women a space in the city where they could relax, eat dinner and meet friends and saving many from the alternative option of taking to the streets in the evening. Clubs were aimed at specific groups of women and ranged from those for working women to the more exclusive Lyceum (1904) for writers and artists. The Minerva Club on Judd Street offered residential rooms to women and was described by one resident as: ‘Well it was

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<sup>118</sup> Osborn, pp. 717, 708, 711, 709.

<sup>119</sup> *Report of The Proceedings of The National Conference*, p. 50.

<sup>120</sup> Gee, ‘Where Shall She Live?’, p. 32.

<sup>121</sup> Gee, ‘Where Shall She Live?’, p. 34.

tatty, very much so, but I think rooms in Bloomsbury always have been, they were single room bed-sitters and a communal dining room where they served meals'.<sup>122</sup>

Octavia Hill was a pioneer in affordable housing that focused on improving existing accommodation, rather than building new premises. At the time of her death in 1912, she controlled almost two thousand houses and flats.<sup>123</sup> In 1921, The Women's Pioneer Housing Society was formed to continue her work. Run as a co-operative it helped provide housing by converting existing properties into flats for working women. Speaking at a dinner of the Society in 1924, Mrs. C. S. Peel, a well-known writer of manuals on domestic management and home matters, explained that the flats 'aimed at providing women workers with houses where there would be scope for individual tastes, and where they could live surrounded by their own household go[ods]'. Reflecting the debates of the early commentators, she concluded that the freedom to personalise their flats was essential, for 'Women longed for homes of their own.'<sup>124</sup>

In all these discussions, the boarding and lodging house is never discussed in its own terms, but is constantly set against the ideal of the private family home. The home is the place where family values and moral behaviour are upheld. By positioning the boarding house as the binary opposite to the family home it becomes the antithesis of home.

### **Inhabiting the Childhood Home of 'Dream-Memory'**

In discussing 'house' and 'home' it is important to distinguish between house as product and home as process: the process being a positive mental state relating to feelings of

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<sup>122</sup> Brian Harrison, 'Interview with Mrs Marion Johnson', 12 April 1975, Ref: 8SUF/B/041, Tape 12, Archive and Museum Collection, The Women's Library, London.

<sup>123</sup> Marion Brion, *Women in the Housing Service* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 11-12.

<sup>124</sup> 'Homes for Women Workers: Lady Astor, M.P., on the Housing Problem', *The Times*, 6 February 1924, p.12.

‘security, control, being at ease and relaxed’.<sup>125</sup> ‘House’ usually refers to the material structure of the building, while ‘home’ is a concept that exists both physically and imaginatively. It refers to the actual physical entity of the house, but it is also an abstract idea, that imbues that physical construction with emotive associations. ‘House’ and ‘home’ are not interchangeable categories: a house does not automatically become a home and a home does not have to be a house.

Literature of the boarding house frequently uses the juxtaposition of the family home in order to create deliberate contrasts between the idea of home and non-home, stability and transience. Storm Jameson’s portrayal of her deliberately unnamed heroine in the novella *A Day Off* (1933), set after the Great War, conveys from the start her character’s feelings of alienation and detachment towards her dwelling space. Jameson’s novel opens with the anonymous woman lying in bed and gazing up at the cracks in the ceiling of her ‘bed-sitting-room off the Tottenham Court Road’.<sup>126</sup> This opening links the interior space of the room with the character’s interiority as the patterning of the fissured plaster becomes an architect’s floor plan of her childhood home:

After a time she opened her eyes and lay over on her back, staring at the ceiling. Its cracks formed crazily the plan of a house, and unnumbered times she had tried to arrange its rooms in an order she knew. The biggest room was the kitchen with her mother’s sewing-machine under the window and the sofa pushed against the wall behind the round table (ADO 8).

By connecting the room with the woman through memory, Jameson encourages the reader to relate the character’s fractured life to her dilapidated lodgings and to make the association between the lines on the ceiling and the woman’s confrontation a few pages later with her aging face in the mirror. From visualising the outline of rooms, Jameson’s character is transported to the action of a remembered childhood scene: ‘In another moment her mother’s voice, light with its pretence of fear: Where *has* the child

<sup>125</sup> Amos Rapoport, ‘A Critical Look at the Concept of Home’, in *The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments*, ed. by David N. Benjamin (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995), pp. 25-52 (p. 29).

<sup>126</sup> Storm Jameson, *A Day Off* (London: Ivor Nicholson & Watson, 1933), p. 35. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with ADO.

gone? Running along the narrow passage she pushed at the door of the front room' (ADO 8). She is no longer lying in bed, her mother is speaking to her and she is running away. The childhood home, immortalised on the cracked ceiling, becomes a brief sanctuary for the woman, recalling Benjamin's autobiographical account *Berlin Childhood*, where he stated that when he was exiled abroad in 1932, aware that he might never again see the city of his birth, he attempted to preserve that part of his life through conscious recollection of his earliest living spaces: 'I deliberately called to mind those images which, in exile, are most apt to waken homesickness: images of childhood'.<sup>127</sup>

The complexity of the relationship between the self and place and its link to the childhood home is examined by one of the earliest philosophers of interior space, Gaston Bachelard. He coined the term 'topoanalysis' in his seminal 1958 work *The Poetics of Space*, to describe 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives' (PS 8). This psychological study is overlaid with a phenomenological approach influenced by Heidegger in which Bachelard takes Heidegger's abstract aesthetic that 'poetically man dwells', and applies it to the specific locale of the house.<sup>128</sup> Bachelard situates the childhood home as 'our first universe' (PS 4) and argues that the memory of that home becomes embodied within the individual, 'physically inscribed in us', existing as 'a house of dream-memory' (PS 14-15). These images of 'felicitous space' (PS xxxv) are brought to life in different ways in each subsequent house an individual inhabits: 'An entire past comes to dwell in a new house (PS 5). Bachelard uses 'dwell' in a Heideggerian sense here; he argues that reliving these memories are an important aspect of creating a self:

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<sup>127</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), p.37.

<sup>128</sup> See Martin Heidegger, '...Poetically Man Dwells...', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, by Heidegger, pp. 213-29.

Our soul is an abode. And by remembering “houses” and “rooms,” we learn to “abide” within ourselves. Now everything becomes clear, the house images move in both directions: they are in us as much as we are in them (PS xxxvii).

The childhood home becomes a metaphor for the stability and comfort of family life in Jameson’s novel. Bachelard conceived his ideas based on the nostalgia of a happy childhood, arguing that: ‘We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection’ (PS 6). Jameson’s character is remembering a time in her life when she felt protected in her family home and where there was always someone there to come and find her when she hid, unlike in her current life: ‘for all anybody cared, for all the women who lived warm and snug in houses in Portland Place cared, she might perish of cold in her lonely room’ (ADO 31).

Jameson’s reference to the ‘lonely room’ is followed by background information on the unnamed woman that provides the context to her situation. She is a former mill girl who came to London and worked in a series of hotels. She set up a home and café business with a married German man and pretended to be his wife until the outbreak of the Great War when he was forced to return to Germany. The woman was working in a shop when she met George, her current lover, who has been supporting her financially for the last five years. They had an arrangement, George ‘had come regularly, once a week, usually on Saturday’ (ADO 39), and in return he had posted her a weekly sum of money. However, neither the money nor George has appeared for four weeks. Jameson describes how ‘with less than ten shillings between her and – nothing’ (ADO 35), the woman will be ‘done for’ (ADO 37), and she needs to find money quickly or become homeless.

The novella is set in the aftermath of the Great War and the unnamed woman makes up one of the many ‘surplus woman’ who were left without husbands following the deaths of nearly three-quarters of a million British soldiers. Census data for England and Wales shows that the number of women to every thousand men increased from 1,068 in

1911 to 1,087 by 1931, and in urban areas these numbers were higher with 1,106 women to every thousand men in 1931.<sup>129</sup> Jameson's heroine is past the age when she could have hoped to marry, she is a middle-aged woman, 'forty-six and getting stout' (ADO 37), with stiff back and varicose veins, old before her time through years of physical work.

In her recent study of unmarried women, Katherine Holden has drawn attention to the 'invisible majority' of women after the war who were not living within families, 'who lived in lodgings, boarding houses or institutions or who had no permanent home'.<sup>130</sup> By the nineteen thirties, lodgings that were originally intended to be temporary had now become a long-term prospect. Jameson highlights that her character had always hoped that George would rescue her from this life: 'He'll soon realise what he has in me, she thought. Who knows, in time he might come to want marriage' (ADO 60). However, when the woman realises that the money from George may never materialise and homelessness becomes a realistic prospect, she feels a new sense of identification with her room:

The room now was her refuge. It was to it she belonged; to the faded wall-paper; the cupboard; the cracks in the ceiling; the smells of old rotten wood, clothes, the worn mats. In silence she rocked and quivered, mad with terror at the thought of leaving it. And to go where? (ADO 45)

The portrayal of her interior space mirrors the woman's sense of being an unwanted item, cast aside: she is also faded, cracked, and worn, there will be nowhere else for her to go. Unlike Miriam, Jameson's heroine can find no sense of freedom in her single room, her only escape is through the fantasy of her childhood home, a fantasy that only serves to highlight the absence of a family home that is out of economic reach for the older unmarried women with no stable work or partner.

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<sup>129</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: Preliminary Report Including Tables of the Population* (London: HMSO, 1931), p. xx.

<sup>130</sup> Katherine Holden, *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England, 1914-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 26.

Bachelard's conception of space gives precedence to the imaginative production of individual space and he specifically refers to the active process of daydreaming and reverie, rather than night dreams, over which the individual can exert little control. It is not the bricks and mortar structure of the house itself that is important to Bachelard, but the experience of mentally inhabiting an *image* of a house, giving priority to the individual and the agency of their imagination over the material space they occupy. The physical structure of the house provides only the material conditions for dreaming: 'the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace' (PS 6).

Bachelard created his theory around the idea of the whole house, but for inhabitants of single rooms, dreaming becomes more complex. Richardson portrays Miriam's room at Mrs Bailey's as a space that shelters daydreaming, giving Miriam 'Freedom for thought' (IV, 196); but for Jameson's heroine, not only does the room provide a shelter for her dreams, her dreams also provide an escape from her room. Through imagination and memory, the woman is spatially transported from a single room to a whole house. The ceiling becomes the catalyst for her to recall a detailed 'dream-memory' (PS 15) of the interior décor of her mother's front room: 'The walls were papered in glistening white and blue stripes, satin-paper that was; she felt carefully the rough-smooth of the pattern. A palm-leaf, dry and brittle, rested against the mirror' (ADO 8). This calm, ordered room of the woman's past exists simultaneously with the contrasting squalid room of her present, that is far from the Bachelardian idea of 'felicitous space' (PS xxxv):

The rumbled bed was the centre of the disorder but everywhere there were clothes tossed down on chairs [...] cigarette ends, a paper bag of something, and a towel-railful of limp damp stockings. Dust, too, everywhere, on the walls, on the shabby paint, on the floor. A film of dust on the water in the hand-basin (ADO 13-14).

Unlike Henri Bergson, Bachelard argues that memories are fixed in space, rather than time: 'Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are' (PS 9). Memories need to be actively remembered in order to regain their movement and temporality. This allows memories of the childhood house and the places one has inhabited in the past to co-exist in a new location.

Jameson's character is able to relive her 'memories of protection' (PS 6) of her childhood home from her squalid bed-sitting room and, Jameson informs us, this is something she has done 'unnumbered times' (ADO 8), suggesting the remembrance has become almost a ritual. Dreaming about her mother's house later in the novel, the woman feels the boundaries between her dream, her memory, and her present reality collapse and collapse:

At first she was aware only of the room, familiar, darkened by the yard. It was outside her, part of the dream. Then she was *in* the dream, so that she saw the room on another level, not as something remembered but as lived (ADO 134).

The dream-image creates a psychological reality that the woman can inhabit in the present; a space that can be created by the imagination in the absence of the material home of childhood.

However, Jameson's novella demonstrates how fragile these co-existing temporalities are, and how the daydream is easily destroyed by reality. During her imaginary journey to her childhood home, Jameson's heroine looks through the window at her mother's house: 'Through the window she saw the streets of small houses falling steeply into the valley' (ADO 8). The woman still has this vision of the northern valley of her childhood in her mind when she gets out of bed and pulls the blind cord. The shock of the London street outside brings her harshly back to the present. The scene, a collision of sound and light, evokes the painting *The Street Enters the House* (1911) by the Italian Futurist artist Umberto Boccioni:

The blind flew up and at once the street entered the room. [...] With the heat and the fierce light, noise flowed into the room, the squeak of wheels on asphalt, voices, a girl's shrill with anger, rough male laughter. She drew back, shrinking from the impact of the street on her unprepared body (ADO 11).

The removal of the protective barrier of the blind causes the street to intrude through the window, preventing the woman from being able to 'dream in peace' (PS 6). This is more than a metaphorical intrusion: the heat, light and noise cross the threshold of the open window and physically assault the woman who shrinks from the 'impact of the street on her unprepared body'. The outside becomes part of the room '[e]ven when she was alone in it she did not feel that her room was empty. Perpetually there were sounds in the street, children, dogs quarrelling, a sudden taxi, people shouting to each other outside The Swan after closing time' (ADO 42). Windows not only allow one to look out, the transparency of the glass transforms it into a permeable boundary that, when open, becomes a threshold between inside and outside. The scene in Jameson's novel not only blurs the boundary between interior and exterior, it also reverses the convention of the viewer as subject, as the objects of her gaze on the outside of the window assume power over her 'shrinking' body. The intrusion of the street highlights the instability of the unnamed woman's situation, the temporary nature of her accommodation, and the fact that in the absence of another weekly payment from George, the street will become her home.

### **1.3 Structures of Power and the Economics of the Boarding House**

In a practical guide, *Hotel and Boarding House Management For Small Establishments*, published in 1935, the author criticised those who rush into setting up a business and who 'seem to share a very common fallacy – that hotel and boarding house management is merely family domestic housekeeping, only on a slightly bigger scale. No assumption could be further removed from the actual truth'. The author argued that the difficulty in running such an establishment lies in the power relationships between the proprietor and

their residents: instead of the ‘invisible family discipline’ that operates in the home, boarding houses and hotels cater for a diverse cross-section of the population who ‘do not share a common background’ and cannot easily be regulated.<sup>131</sup>

The author makes several important distinctions here between domesticity and how it is defined in relation to the family home and the hotel or boarding house. Their statement that it is not ‘merely family domestic housekeeping’ simultaneously elevates the keeping of the hotel and boarding house to the professional status of the commercial world and denigrates family housekeeping in the private home. However, their conflation of the hotel and the boarding house into one category masks a gendered distinction between the two that is alluded to in the above comment on housekeeping. There appears to be a distinction made between ‘running’ a hotel and ‘keeping’ a boarding house that aligned hotel management with that of a professional business and the boarding house management with domestic housekeeping. In the United States, as the hotel business became professionalised the proprietors increasingly became men.<sup>132</sup>

It seems that a similar gendered situation was taking place in England; the 1931 Census recorded 68,728 women lodging and boarding house keepers, compared to 8,817 men. Inn and hotel keepers, however, far outnumbered women at 68,734 compared to 21,618.<sup>133</sup> In addition, unlike the inns and hotels whose numbers were straightforward to record, it is likely that there would have been far more women taking in one or two boarders whose houses would have gone unrecorded on official records. Taking in a lodger was one of the many ‘female survival strategies’ that could be carried out without leaving the family home, making it particularly suitable for those caring for children.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> S. W. W., p. 10.

<sup>132</sup> Betsy Klimasmith, *At Home in the City: Urban Domesticity in American Literature and Culture, 1850-1930* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2005), p. 43.

<sup>133</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: Occupation Tables* (London: HMSO, 1934), p. 13.

<sup>134</sup> Lynn Abrams, *The Making of Modern Woman: Europe 1789-1918* (London: Pearson Education, 2002), p. 140.

In his foreword to *The Market Town Lodging House in Victorian England*, Barrie Trinder has referred to the lodging house as ‘an obscure but significant part of the urban mechanism’.<sup>135</sup> Boarding house rooms that are rented out as living spaces rather than as holiday homes are inevitably located in the densely populated urban spaces of cities and towns rather than in isolated rural communities, therefore what is outside the house and, in particular, the relationship of the house to wider public social space is a vital consideration. This is particularly true for women who did not operate as a ‘professional’ business and who were reliant on community networks for boarders. In contrast to Heidegger and Bachelard whose concepts of dwelling and housing are static, Henri Lefebvre provides an interpretation of the house as a place of movement and connection, that is ‘permeated from every direction by streams of energy’ it is ‘a complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits’ (POS 93), and this is perhaps a way of conceptualising the boarding house, as a social product that is dependent upon a complex of social mobilities.

### **Perceived, Conceived and Lived Space**

In his seminal work *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues against the Cartesian view of abstract or geometrical space as a ‘frame’ or a ‘container’, which is neutral and ‘designed simply to receive whatever is poured into it’ (POS 93-4). Lefebvre argues that space is a construction, it is a social product that is produced by individuals in society, and when thinking of space there must be an indication of ‘what occupies that space and how it does so’ (POS 12). His concern was to understand how space is produced through social and cultural practice and to identify the political ramifications of space.

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<sup>135</sup> Barrie Trinder, *The Market Town Lodging House in Victorian England* (Leicester: Friends of the Centre for English Local History, 2001), p. 1.

Lefebvre cites Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* as an influence on his thinking, along with Nietzsche and Heidegger. Lefebvre takes his notion of 'production' from Karl Marx, but, as Stuart Elden has argued, his understanding of history is not that of the linear progression of Marxist thinking, instead it is closer to 'a Nietzschean sense of change and cycles'.<sup>136</sup> Lefebvre's spatial project attempts to bridge the gap between 'the space of the philosophers and the space of people who deal with material things' (POS 4), to produce, in essence, a materialist phenomenology. To do this he seeks to 'construct a theoretical unity' between the ontological distinctions of the physical, the mental and the social (POS 11).

The Lefebvrian framework for understanding the production of space uses three interconnected triads to articulate his views on how space is socially produced. To his distinctions of space as the physical, the mental and the social, Lefebvre added the perceived, the conceived and the lived, which in turn relate to his three spatial concepts of spatial practice, representations of space and representational space, respectively.<sup>137</sup> 'Spatial practice' refers to the routines and activities and the production and reproduction of social relations within daily life as *perceived* by the individual in physical space. 'Representations of space' refers to the 'dominant space in any society'. It is the abstract mental space, the 'conceptualized space' of scientists and planners who are the producers of space: they *conceive* of spaces that are then perceived and lived by the users of space. The lived, social spaces of the users Lefebvre defines as 'representational spaces', that is 'space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' and this is also the space of the imagination (POS 38-39). These triads can all combine in a single physical location to produce an overall conception of space that 'is at once conceived, perceived, and directly lived' (POS 356).

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<sup>136</sup> Stuart Elden, 'Rhythmanalysis: An Introduction', in *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, by Henri Lefebvre, trans. by Stuart Elden and Gerald Moore (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. vii-xv (p. xi).

<sup>137</sup> 'The perceived-conceived-lived triad (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces)' (POS 40).

Every society and mode of production produces its own space and as with any capitalist commodity, there are owners and users of space. Lefebvre identifies the space of the owners as the ‘dominated’ space, and that of the users as the ‘appropriated’ space: ‘the outside space of the community is dominated, while the indoor space of family life is appropriated’ (POS 166). It is only in their representational space, and through their spatial practices, that the users of space are able to exert any sense of ownership through appropriation. Lefebvre argues that representational space is dominated space ‘which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate’ (POS 39). This becomes a way of taking ownership of the dominated space, by personalising it through the imagination and material objects that have emotional connections.

### **‘Not a real house, but a place of hire and bargain’**

How can Lefebvre’s concepts shed light on the power dynamics of the boarding house? As discussed earlier, there were residential hostels for women that were conceived by architects for that specific purpose, however, the majority of boarding houses and places that rented bed-sitting rooms were converted family homes. Lefebvre argues that a house will always be appropriated space: however, if we understand Lefebvre’s theoretical triad as the dialectical exchange he intended, rather than three terms separated by ‘an abyss’ (POS 6), then each term is part of a fluid three-way dialogue that allows for movement between positions, rather than each concept serving a specific purpose that must remain unchanged. It is, therefore, possible to think about the conversion of boarding house space in a way that appreciates its shifting function from home to business.<sup>138</sup> When the

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<sup>138</sup> I am following Stuart Elden’s argument here that Lefebvre’s triad ‘allows the dialectic to not simply be the resolution of two conflicting terms but a three-way process’, in Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 37. Elden’s interpretation does not give priority to one term over another they all have equal value. This is in contrast to Edward Soja’s interpretation that views physical and mental space culminating in social space to produce a ‘thirdspace’, see Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-imagined Places* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

landlord or landlady appropriated the house that was conceptualised as a family home, the original layout of rooms and doors is broken and, in this transformation, the house becomes re-conceived into a new form of what Lefebvre termed ‘representations of space’ (POS 39). The former family home now functions as a dominated space where the spatial practices of the boarders are restricted through rules determined by the owners; so within the original appropriated space, there can exist a dominated space.

By viewing the division of space within the boarding house through this organising framework, it then becomes possible to analyse the very different spatial practices of the inhabitants, with the appropriated space determining the spatial practices of the boarding house keeper, and the dominated space determining the spatial practice of the boarder.

In her novel *The New House* (1936), Lettice Cooper describes the restrictions of boarding house life for the elderly spinster Aunt Ellen that are clearly dominated by her landlady Miss Russell, the owner of that space:

There was no hot water in the bedrooms at night unless you fetched it for yourself, and the bathroom was locked after ten, so if you came in late you could not fetch it [...] comfort was doled out and grudged [...] Because this was not a real house, but a place of hire and bargain, people were supplied with the minimum of everything they could put up with.<sup>139</sup>

The emphasis is on the commercial aspect of the house a place ‘of hire and bargain’, rather than ‘a real house’, by which Cooper means a family home. The positive aspect of the boarding house was that it provided the women who ran them with the power to take control of the household finances. What differentiates the housekeeping tasks they perform is that instead of undertaking unpaid labour for a family, their work is paid for by the boarders and could in some cases be profitable. Wendy Gamber has argued that in the boarding house

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<sup>139</sup> Lettice Cooper, *The New House* (1936; repr. London: Persephone Books, 2004), p. 282. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with NH.

the moral contagions of the market invaded social relationships that ideally remained untainted by base economic concerns. For in boardinghouses women washed, cleaned, and cooked for money, services that elsewhere they presumably provided out of love.<sup>140</sup>

The home, and by extension the landlady and her domestic services, became a commodity. The economics of the boarding house are related to the earlier discussions in this chapter on privacy. In order to keep the family private it must be kept separate from public life and ‘free from the taint of the market place’.<sup>141</sup> Once a family house was open to boarders that privacy was eroded as the proprietors’ time and space became the public property of her residents. This was confirmed in *Hotel and Boarding House Management*, where the author stated that a proprietor must ‘live with his guests for at least twelve out of the twenty-four hours in each day. He must forego any hopes of a private life’.<sup>142</sup>

In her daily life, Ellen’s spatial practices are constrained by living in the dominated space of her landlady’s house. Even the privacy of Ellen’s room is uncertain as demonstrated by Cooper’s description of Ellen sleeping with her valuables: ‘Ellen slipped her hand under the pillow to feel if her watch, her handkerchief, and the key of her little writing-desk were all safe in their usual place’ (NH 283). Miss Russell has a key to Ellen’s room making the writing desk Ellen’s only lockable and truly private space. This echoes the common usage of the servant’s box in Georgian England, lacking a secure room of their own ‘servants had to put their faith in the lock to their box’.<sup>143</sup> Although Ellen has her own front door key she does not enjoy the freedom of unimpeded access to the building: ‘Ellen had a key, but, while she was fitting it into the lock, Miss Russell opened the door for her. She liked to know when people came in, and, if possible, what they had been doing’ (NH 280).

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<sup>140</sup> Gamber, p. 2.

<sup>141</sup> Davidoff, ‘Separation of Home and Work’, p. 70.

<sup>142</sup> S. W. W., p. 13.

<sup>143</sup> Vickery, p. 40.

Christian Schmid has highlighted the fact that in Lefebvre's theory, exchange in 'the commodity society is not limited to the (physical) exchange of objects. It also requires communication, confrontation, comparison, and, therefore, language and discourse [...] thus a mental exchange'.<sup>144</sup> A mental exchange takes place between Miss Russell, who wants to know every activity of her boarders, and Ellen, whose only exercise of power is to withhold or reveal information to her landlady in the form of a bartering system. Miss Russell's frustration that Ellen is not more communicative about her day helping her sister Nathalie move to their new house is expressed by her reiteration of the rules regarding the use of the bathroom and hot water: "Good night, Miss Lister," said Miss Russell, disappointed. "I'm sorry it's too late for the bath" (NH 281). Earlier in the day, Ellen had anticipated returning late to the boarding house and had telephoned Miss Russell to say 'that she would not be back for supper. She felt necessary, wanted, and a little proud that Miss Russell should know it' (NH 157).

Lefebvre questions why the users of space allow themselves to be manipulated by the producers and owners of space. The reason for their passivity, he argues, is due to the rules governing social behaviour; rules that are unwritten but instinctively embedded within the psyche of each citizen:

This economy valorizes certain relationships between people in particular places (shops, cafés, cinemas, etc.) and this gives rise to connotative discourses concerning these places; these in turn generate "consensuses" or conventions according to which, for example, such and such a place is supposed to be trouble-free, a quiet area' (POS 56).

These rules govern the spatial practices of the users of space who are often unaware of being constrained by them. Thus social space 'facilitates the control of society, while at the same time being a *means of production*' (POS 349 Italics in original). Not only does

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<sup>144</sup> Christian Schmid, 'Henri Lefebvre's Theory of The Production of Space: Towards a Three-Dimensional Dialectic', trans. by Bandulasena Goonewardena in *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri Lefebvre*, ed. by Kanishka Goonewardena, Stefan Kipfer and others (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 27-45 (p. 40).

social space enable the control and modification of behaviours, it also becomes a means of production in itself in that it is produced through human labour. In other words, social space is produced by the spatial practices of individuals: '(Social) space is a (social) product' (POS 26).

Ellen has always followed the rules of Miss Russell's house without being aware of how much she has had to modify her behaviour: 'She had lived cheerfully in Lyndoch, stressing its advantages and reminding herself often how much more fortunate she was than a lot of other people' (NH 281). Perhaps, unwittingly, she had also been following the unwritten rules of society that govern the correct behaviour for an unmarried, older woman, the same rules upon which Virginia Woolf's character Katharine Hilbery ruminates in *Night and Day* (1919) that state: 'The rules which should govern the behaviour of an unmarried woman are written in red ink, graved upon marble, if, by some freak of nature, it should fall out that the unmarried woman has not the same writing scored upon her heart'.<sup>145</sup>

Ellen's life has been dedicated to others, as the unmarried daughter she 'had given up her life' (NH 80) and remained at home caring for her mother through a protracted illness until her eventual death. Ellen's mother had trained Ellen from an early age that her daughter's own wants and needs were not important: 'It would never have occurred to her [Ellen] for a moment that she mattered as much as her mother' (NH 279). Brought up 'not to expect much' (NH 144) and to be happy with what she had, 'Mamma always said that if you had a good home and good health and were miserable, it must be your own fault' (NH 200). This has led Ellen to perceive the boarding house as all she can expect in life. In 'making the best of it' she does not seek to elicit sympathy from others, she describes the house as 'comfortable and convenient' (NH 276) as much to convince herself as to reassure her sister's family.

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<sup>145</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day* (1919; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 328.

To theorise how space and spatial practices are perceived raises the question of perspective. Space can be perceived in different ways by different individuals and is also dependent on whether the subject is outside or inside that space. The earlier examples of Miriam Henderson and the unnamed heroine of Storm Jameson's novel *A Day Off*, indicate how those inhabiting the space of the single room could perceive it differently: for Miriam Henderson it is a space *to* which she can escape for freedom to think, but for Jameson's heroine, who is 'was forty-six and getting stout' (ADO 37), it is a place *from* which she dreams of escape.

Cooper's novel *The New House* also demonstrates the different meanings of home for the older and younger woman. As the unmarried daughter remaining in the family house, the heroine Rhoda Powell is trapped in the role of dutiful carer and companion for her tyrannical mother Nathalie. At the age of thirty-three Rhoda 'had hardly left home' (NH 28), and when Nathalie moves to a new house it is unquestioningly assumed by the family that Rhoda will accompany her mother. Rhoda's brother Maurice is married with a family, and her sister Delia left home for a job in London after she finished school. Delia is now engaged and will be leaving her job after her marriage, providing a vacancy for which Delia encourages Rhoda to apply. Rhoda views the idea of taking Delia's job in London and living in a boarding house as an escape and chance at living her own life. As the novel progresses through the morning, afternoon and evening of the moving day, Cooper works through Rhoda's feelings of guilt in leaving her mother, and her final decision to take Delia's job is only a verbal statement of intent rather than an actual act of departure at the end of the novel.

Cooper deliberately emphasises how, by sacrificing her life for the life of her mother, Rhoda's life is beginning to mirror that of her mother's elderly sister Aunt Ellen, as Cooper's omniscient narrator comments, 'That was how family life went – a ceaseless chain of reproductions' (NH 99). The stark contrast between Rhoda's desire to escape the

family home and Aunt Ellen's longing for a home of her own, reflect two very different perceptions of boarding house life. What for Rhoda is a positive dream of independence, for Ellen has become a lonely, isolated existence. The idea of taking Rhoda's place and being a companion for her sister in a 'real house' is Ellen's own dream of freedom:

If she were in a real house, and several people turned up to tea when the maid was out, how gladly she would run into the kitchen and cut plates of bread-and-butter and make toast! What fun it would be to re-cover the cushions, or plant bulbs in the garden! (NH 282)

These are spatial practices that are determined by the representational space one inhabits. While Miss Russell could certainly do all these things in her own house, Ellen is unable to do any of them because she does not have the necessary access to the spaces in which to perform these tasks. Ellen's yearning for a house of her own is echoed in the diary of Winifred Fitzjohn, a fifty-nine year old woman who recorded her experiences of living alone in a single room in a London woman's club. In her Mass Observation Day Survey for 16 August 1937, Fitzjohn admits to frequent 'fits of deepest longing for my own house and furniture'. With a similar air of 'making the best of it' (NH 276) that Ellen exhibits, Fitzjohn describes how 'the only way to keep going and not become just an unwanted "old maid"' is to keep a 'little spirit of adventure', that involves 'assigning ones [*sic*] cheer for the evening meal and go looking as fresh and happy as one can'.<sup>146</sup>

Lefebvre argues that within representations of space, there are representational spaces that users can appropriate. In the representational space of her room, the taste of Ellen's landlady dominates: 'It was furnished with a bedroom suite which Miss Russell had bought under the impression that it was modern furniture' (NH 281). The symbolic use of the space that Ellen makes is on the dressing table, which is 'covered with Aunt Ellen's own things' (NH 281), mainly photographs of her sister's family and their children. These artefacts create the meaning in Ellen's lived space and Ellen takes the

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<sup>146</sup> Mass Observation Archive (University of Sussex), Day Survey 059, 16 August 1937.

appropriation of her sister's family beyond these images by living her life for and through the Powell family, as her nephew Maurice reflects:

What a life! Grandmamma's slave up to the day she died, and spending what spare time she had doing odd jobs for the rest of the family. Hadn't she always come to stay when they had measles, when his mother was ill, or when they were getting ready for a party? He could not remember that she had ever had any fun of her own, or that anyone had even suggested that she should (NH 75).

Helping Rhoda unpack after the move, Cooper describes how Ellen had 'always taken a vicarious pride' in her sister Nathalie's possessions (NH 198). It is not the material goods themselves that Ellen wants, but the life that they symbolise. After a day spent helping her sister move house her perception of her boarding house life shifts: 'She could not pretend to herself this evening that her rootless life in this place satisfied her. Nobody needed her here, and she contributed nothing except her weekly payment' (NH 182). Her conscious awareness at the end of the novel that the material space of the boarding house she inhabits is not a 'real house' (NH 282) is linked to her realisation that perhaps her own inner life does matter.

### **Strategies and Tactics**

Lefebvre's original premise was to unite the theoretical with the practical and his theory of space highlights the active nature of the creation of social space. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau builds on Lefebvre's work, sharing his concerns with the activities of ordinary people and their creation of spaces, but coming from a different disciplinary background of history, anthropology and psychoanalysis, rather than sociology and philosophy. De Certeau states that the objective of his work is an analysis of the systems that form culture, 'the mute processes that organize the establishment of socio-economic order', to understand how individuals can 'reappropriate the space

organized by the techniques of sociocultural production'.<sup>147</sup> De Certeau's Marxist approach contends that the structures of everyday life are imposed on individuals by the ideologies of the dominant order and they are expected to passively accept them. Because the individual is unable to change these systems, de Certeau argues the only way for a person to achieve any form of agency is by outwitting the ruling power through individual transgressions.

These transgressions, the subverting and appropriating of the imposed systems, de Certeau refers to as 'tactics' (*tactiques*), that is, procedures employed by the ordinary person to gain a sense of personal control. These tactics are ways of reappropriating the 'product-system' (products, activities, spaces) by 'non-producers'. One of the ways by which the means of production of the elite can be appropriated by the workers is through creating something of their own on company time, 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer' (PEL 25). An example of this is the tactic employed by Stevie Smith's heroine Pompey Casmilus, in *Novel on Yellow Paper* (1936), who types her novel during her working hours on office yellow paper. Tactics become a way for the individual to escape the everyday life of alienation under capitalism, at least mentally, even if they are still constrained by it physically.

The imposition of power over space de Certeau terms strategies (*stratégies*); strategies 'produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces [...] whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and direct these spaces' (PEL 30). These terms relate to the Lefebvrian spatial triad, in that 'strategies' can be understood as the dominated representations of space and 'tactics' to the appropriation employed by users in their representational space and by their spatial practices.<sup>148</sup> In the space of the boarding house, that can contain both dominated and appropriated space, these tactics and strategies can often become a

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<sup>147</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xiv. It was first published in French in 1980 and translated into English in 1984. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with PEL.

<sup>148</sup> Thacker, *Moving through Modernity*, p. 31.

complex two-way exchange, as both landlady and boarder attempt to manipulate spaces to their own advantage.

For de Certeau '*space is a practiced place*' (PEL 117, italics in the original). He inverts the common definition of space and place which views place as that which is created by individuals in their use and appropriation of space; instead de Certeau defines place (*lieu*) as the empty grid and space (*espace*) as the entity created by practice. He describes 'practice' as the physical movements and activities of people within a place: 'Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers'. In a place two things cannot co-exist, it is a static and stable entity, but a space allows for 'vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables' and is thus composed of 'intersections of mobile elements' (PEL 117). For de Certeau, place is static and it is movement that creates space.

While strategies have clearly designated places of power from which their actions originate, tactics are distinguished by the absence of any one static location: 'The space of the tactic is the space of the other' (PEL 37). Tactics must exist outside designated locations; utilising the mobility that this 'nowhere' space (PEL 37) provides to seek out opportunities to act which must be taken up in that moment. Working in this 'other' space, tactics can manipulate the system from within. De Certeau's concept is similar to that of Michel Foucault's idea of heterotopias, non-hegemonic spaces of otherness that exist in the thresholds between things, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two.

In E. H. Young's novel *Jenny Wren* (1932), the character Sarah Lorimer operates in just such a nowhere space. As a residential housekeeper who is currently between jobs, Sarah is effectively homeless and without a stable place of her own. She accepts an invitation to visit her sister, the widowed Louisa Rendall, who has opened a boarding house with her two daughters Jenny and Delia. Young's portrayal of this boarding house

is of a not particularly successful venture. The boarders do not stay long and the temporary nature of their lodgings is reinforced by the Rendalls' inability to manage the spaces of the house as they constantly shift their boarders between rooms to make way for new people. There is also a pressing need for the house to make a profit as Louisa is in debt to Thomas Grimshaw, her former lover, who has helped her with the initial purchase of the boarding house. Louisa does not have a business mind. Young describes early in the novel how Louisa had envisaged the boarding house as 'a bit of fun,' and when her plans to fill the house with 'friendly, jovial lodgers' and take pleasure in 'the thought of their money' do not materialise she writes to her sister motivated by a 'loneliness [that] cried out for her own flesh and blood'.<sup>149</sup> Aunt Sarah arrives at the house and sees an opportunity: 'She wanted the amenities of a home, and here was one where she should be welcome' (JW 195-6). Her tactics operate under the guise of assisting, 'I'll do what I can to help your mother' (JW 194), and wanting to make the boarding house a success, but her underling motive is to make it a permanent home for herself:

Her business instincts were stronger and, as soon as she saw the house, she recognised Louisa's waste of its limited capacity for boarders. There was work here for a capable woman who had left one situation and was hesitating about taking another, and Sarah meant to do it (JW 196).

Sarah's plans are to fill the boarding house with 'a collection of maiden ladies like Miss Morrison, who would not be liable to removal, who would share sitting-rooms and pay well and have poor appetites' (JW 196). Her tactics against the Rendalls, the owners of the house, make use of the only resource she has: the malicious spread of gossip. However, Young shows Aunt Sarah thwarted in her attempts when Louisa marries Thomas Grimshaw, 'That'll put Sarah out!' (JW 343), thus denying her the chance to make the boarding house her home and demonstrating how the spatial practices of the boarding house inhabitants are always dominated by the owners of that space.

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<sup>149</sup> E. H. Young, *Jenny Wren* (1932; repr. London: Virago, 1985), pp. 17, 219, 48. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with JW.

#### 1.4 The Interwar Years and the Problems of Affordable Accommodation

During the Great War there was a growing need for female lodging and boarding due to women's increased mobility during war work. Although women's employment declined immediately after the war, it had increased again by the end of the 1920s and, with marriage bars in place, the majority of these jobs were targeted at single women who would often choose to live away from home. The 1931 Census recorded a fifteen per cent increase over the previous ten years of those living in hotels, boarding and lodging houses in London and Greater London to 356,853.<sup>150</sup> *The New Survey of London Life and Labour* of 1935, a social investigation into living conditions based on the pioneering work of Charles Booth, confirmed that significantly more women were living as lodgers away from their families.<sup>151</sup>

The number of women's lodging houses in London catering for mainly lower-middle and middle-class working women had risen to around one hundred and seventy in 1925 from approximately sixty in 1910.<sup>152</sup> Women's hostels were often the first choice for the single woman worker when moving to a new city, before graduating to the longer-term boarding house and bed-sitting rooms. When one young girl, Rhona, migrated to London from her home in Londonderry, Northern Ireland to take up a position at the Inland Revenue in 1938, she boarded first at a women's hostel in Earl's Court, West London for a year before moving to board with a family in Canonbury, North London.<sup>153</sup>

By the 1920s and 30s, women had a greater choice of housing options, from clubs and hostels to boarding houses and bed-sitting rooms, an increased number of women also moved into flats (or flatlets) either alone or with friends. Despite this, single, working women still struggled to find affordable accommodation. By the thirties the average rate

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<sup>150</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: General Tables*, p. 112.

<sup>151</sup> The London School of Economics and H. Lewellyn Smith, *The New Survey of London Life and Labour, Volume IX: Life and Leisure* (London: P. S. King and Son, 1935), p. 294.

<sup>152</sup> Gee, 'Where Shall She Live?', p. 28.

<sup>153</sup> Colin G. Pooley, 'Getting to Know the City: The Construction of Spatial Knowledge in London in the 1930s', *Urban History*, 31 (2004), 210-228, (p. 217).

in the 'better class' of London boarding house was around two guineas.<sup>154</sup> In Delius's novel, *Boarding House*, Miss Joicey rents a small room in the attic 'hardly bigger than a ship's cabin' to Mabel Loring, a student at a local hospital, for thirty-seven and sixpence a week, which was just under two pounds.<sup>155</sup>

Writing about the difficulties for London's women teachers, Dina M. Copelman argues that teachers were 'probably too respectable for the cheap types of accommodation' such as the YWCA and GFS hotels. She quotes a survey of 1923 that found that seventy-five per cent of hostels advertised themselves as being for 'professional women' or 'the higher class of business women', but the charges of between one and two pounds per week continued to make them unaffordable for teachers and those closest in status and pay such as clerical workers, typists and shop girls.<sup>156</sup>

One journalist noted the problem of low salaries for the proliferation of typists in the city and its impact on their poor diet: 'the girl who has to provide food, lodgings, and clothing out of a salary which does not always reach a pound a week, and rarely exceeds thirty shillings, more often than not has to make her tea-shop lunch her principal meal. She would rather die than confess it'.<sup>157</sup> The landlady of the Bloomsbury boarding house in Bradshaw's *Murder At The Boarding House*, describes the evening meal she provides to her boarder, Miss Tassy who works as a typist in the city:

I provide her with an evening meal –not that it's much of one. Sometimes a boiled egg by way of a treat, but mostly a bit of bread and cheese. Occasionally, I persuade her to let me buy her a box of sardines – runs into fourpence halfpenny. But there's six in a box, and they last her three evenings, so I tell her that's not ruination. It isn't as if I doled 'em out, and charged her accordingly.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> S. W. W., p. 78.

<sup>155</sup> Delius, p. 83.

<sup>156</sup> Dina M. Copelman, *London's Women Teachers: Gender, Class and Feminism, 1870-1930* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 153, 154.

<sup>157</sup> Frances, 'Five O'Clock Tea Talk: A Woman's Restaurant', *T. P.'s Weekly*, 11 December 1903, p. 918, quoted in Lawrence Rainey, *Revisiting 'The Waste Land'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 56-7.

<sup>158</sup> Bradshaw, pp. 28-9.

There continued to be campaigners for the working-woman's cause: the Over Thirty Association was formed in December 1934 'with a view to meeting the serious problems of unemployment among middle-aged and elderly [women] workers', in particular in relation to affordable housing. Their 1936 report was dedicated 'to all who live in bed-sitting rooms' and recounted the problems women over the age of thirty faced when they were unable to find the work needed to maintain their rented rooms.<sup>159</sup> These debates around affordable housing followed on from those that had taken place earlier in the century. However, while those debates had focused on the morals and respectability of young girls alone in the city, the Over Thirty Association demonstrated that it had become a serious issue for women of all ages. It was a particularly pressing issue for those over the age of thirty, without family to support them and no prospect of marriage. As Judy Giles has pointed out, women reaching adulthood in the interwar period 'found themselves in a social world still committed to marriage as the sole locus of a woman's fulfilment at a time when the actual supply of men to marry was seriously depleted'.<sup>160</sup>

By the thirties, these women were realising the economic implications of their low paid work and its inability to support them not only into middle age, but also for the rest of their lives. For the unmarried woman, being able to view her boarding house room as a space of freedom was dependent on long-term economic stability.

### **House and Home**

An idealised image of the home continued to penetrate the twentieth century and was strategically resurrected after the Great War: the interwar period saw a similar increase in the domestication and feminisation of private space that had been experienced in the

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<sup>159</sup> Rosamond Tweedy, *'Consider Her Palaces': A Study of the Housing Problem of Lower Paid Single Women Workers in London, Being a Report of an Enquiry undertaken for the Over Thirty Association* (London: The Over Thirty Association, 1936), p. 6.

<sup>160</sup> Judy Giles, *Women, Identity and Private Life in Britain, 1900-50* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1995), p. 33.

nineteenth century. According to John Burnett, expanded home ownership and diminished family size served to increase the ‘importance attached to the home’, making the interwar generation ‘perhaps the most family-minded and home-centred one in history’.<sup>161</sup> Although there had been significant changes in the organisation of private life, there was never a complete break from the ideology that underpinned the nineteenth-century interior. The domesticity that had been reconfigured by the war was formally and self-consciously reconstructed, embodied in events such as the *Daily Mail*’s Ideal Home Exhibition with its array of labour-saving devices designed to turn domestic drudgery into a pleasure. In addition, publications such as the middle-class *Good Housekeeping* (1922) and the mass-market *Women’s Own* (1932) ostensibly elevated the status of the housewife to skilled professional.<sup>162</sup>

In Delius’s novel *Boarding House*, Kathleen Joicey, the housekeeper, leaves to set up her own business as a boarding house proprietor and wants to stress, through the interior design of the house, the difference between her new establishment and the impersonal hotel she has just left. When the decorator tells her ‘You’ve made it like a private house, and not an hotel at all’, she feels she has achieved that goal.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, the women’s lodging houses that were built in the early years of the twentieth century, such as Brabazon House (1902) and Ada Lewis House (1913), ‘essentially took the model of the middle class Victorian home and inflated it to cater to a larger community’.<sup>164</sup>

Life for women between the two World Wars was a conflict between increasing opportunity for independence outside the home and a greater emphasis after the Great War on a return to home and domestic duties. In her book *Felicitous Space*, Judith Fryer has observed the paradox that ‘exactly as women moved increasingly outside the home –

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<sup>161</sup> Burnett, p. 265.

<sup>162</sup> Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 85.

<sup>163</sup> Delius, p. 52.

<sup>164</sup> Gee, ‘Where Shall She Live?’, p. 41.

becoming a cause of social disorder – the *model* home became a rigid construct imposed on a social situation as a means of establishing order and control'.<sup>165</sup> The female-only spaces of hostels and regulated lodging houses were seen as the ideal containment for single women, where respectability could be enforced through strict rules and curfews. However, with limited rooms available, women often had to seek somewhere to live outside these conceived systems of order and control, in bed-sitting rooms and boarding houses.

Davidoff has argued that demand for lodging decreased by the 1930s as the interwar promotion of the home and the nuclear family took hold, meaning there was 'no social space for the lodger'.<sup>166</sup> What Davidoff does not mention in her account is that at a period of time when women's boarding and lodging was becoming commonplace, it was suddenly marginalized again, by the very same debates about women's place that had emerged in the initial considerations of the need for women's housing. The idea that women's place should not only be in the home, but that their home should be an integral part of them, due to their natural domestic nature, remained the same by the 1930s as it was when the issues of lodging for women were originally considered at the turn of the century.

Boarding and lodging formulated a new relationship with the home in the interwar period that reflected changing perceptions of women, the family, and domesticity. However, in a period when this type of accommodation was increasing and, for growing numbers of single women, taking the place of the traditional permanent family home, the discourses surrounding these spaces were still those of transience.

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<sup>165</sup> Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 28.

<sup>166</sup> Davidoff, 'Separation of Home and Work', p. 92.

## Chapter 2

### **‘Placed in an Instant’: Social Class and the Boarding House**

But there was a look of sharp suspicion in Miss Quince’s face as Sheila went upstairs; she was shrewd enough to realize that this girl was of a very different type to those who usually came to her for lodgings. “She’s a lady,” she thought with a sense of dismay, and mentally contrasted her with the Cunningham sisters and other girls who had from time to time occupied rooms beneath her roof.

Ruby M. Ayres, *The Little Lady in Lodgings*<sup>167</sup>

In *The Little Lady in Lodgings* (1922) by the popular romantic novelist Ruby M. Ayres, the plot is centred on the perceived social class of the central characters, and the ways in which all their judgements are coloured by their inherent class assumptions. When the landlady Miss Quince gives a room in her boarding house in Kensington to Sheila Rorley she knows at once that there is something different about her; despite Sheila’s impoverished appearance she is obviously ‘a lady’.<sup>168</sup>

Sheila is indeed above the other boarding house inhabitants in term of social class. She is the granddaughter of the wealthy Sir John Rorley, but has run away from his house to avoid an arranged marriage and is now passing under the name of Mary Robinson. The first man she encounters, George Alliston, acts as Sheila’s protector and takes her to Miss Quince’s. He is a taxi driver and gives Sheila a job in the office attached to his garage. Even though he is in love with Sheila he hides his feelings because he assumes she will consider him beneath her in social rank: ‘I thought perhaps now you know what I am, you wouldn’t care to see me any more’. Lord Ronald is the other love interest in the story, a philandering lord, who although titled is greatly in debt and whose mother and sister ‘spend their lives trotting up suitable heiresses’ for him to marry. He falls in love with Sheila, but backs out of his marriage proposal due to his perception of her as the ‘little lady in lodgings’ with no money: ‘I’ve got to marry a woman in my own position’. On

<sup>167</sup> Ruby M. Ayres, *The Little Lady in Lodgings* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1922), p. 35.

<sup>168</sup> Even though the book has ‘lodgings’ in the title, Miss Quince advertises her house as a ‘boarding establishment’ (p. 38) and provides her residents with meals.

learning of Sheila's status as an heiress, he again proposes marriage, but Sheila finds she cannot forgive him for not being able to see past his preconceived ideas of social class. She breaks off her engagement with Lord Ronald and chooses instead to marry George Allison who 'never thought [...] that I was just a typist'.<sup>169</sup>

I start with this novel, published in 1922, because it illustrates two aspects of class that I want to discuss in relation to the boarding house. The first is the visual class signifiers that are used throughout the novel to determine the social class of each character, 'a real gentleman in spats – lovely grey spats – and an eye-glass', and how these continued to be utilised in both literature and historical accounts throughout the thirties.<sup>170</sup> The second is how the setting of the boarding house is employed as a vehicle for constructing the popular 'mistaken identity' plot, due to the ambiguous nature of these class signifiers within the boarding house.

Even though Miss Quince advertises her premises as a 'select boarding establishment', her residents are clearly not from the upper classes. Lillian Cunningham, an actress boarding at Miss Quince's, expresses her surprise to Sheila: 'What are your people doing letting you rough it in a shop like this?' The working-class and lower-middle-class inhabitants of the boarding house can distinguish that Sheila's manner and behaviour place her in a class above their own, but living in the boarding house quickly reduces Sheila's perceived class status in the eyes of her own social class. The upper-class people Sheila encounters outside the boarding house, such as Lord Ronald, who would have been her contemporaries, are unable to see past the shabby clothes, her job in the office of a garage, and her accommodation. As a resident at Miss Quince's, Ayres highlights how Sheila loses the identity that had always been established through her

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<sup>169</sup> Ayres, pp. 28, 44, 89, 138, 187.

<sup>170</sup> Ayres, p. 115.

family name, when ‘she was indeed somebody, and not just a little typist who lived in inferior lodgings’.<sup>171</sup>

Rob Shields has argued that ‘The same place, at one and the same time, can be made to *symbolise* a whole variety of social statuses, personal conditions, and social attitudes’.<sup>172</sup> This chapter will seek to understand the complex, multi-layered aspects of class in boarding house life. It begins with an outline of the historical context to situate the debates that were taking place about social class in the nineteen thirties. The boarding house was a microcosm of society and signifiers of social class became heightened in this space. The ability to initiate what Doreen Massey has referred to as ‘the flows and the movement’ necessary for social mobility was complicated by the ambiguity of domestic roles.<sup>173</sup> The landlady was mistress of the house yet servant to her boarders, and the boarders were exempted from domestic duties yet controlled by domestic rules. Davidoff has described how ‘lodgers, like servants, were also liminal figures at the boundaries of families, eluding any clear categorization’.<sup>174</sup> For women who historically had ‘no legal or financial identity outside the family and marriage’, the class status of both landlady and female boarder was problematic.<sup>175</sup> The second and third sections of this chapter consider historical materials alongside the imaginative representation in Stella Gibbons’s novel *Bassett* (1934) in order to analyse the ways in which class signifiers were inscribed within the boarding house.

The final two sections examine the alternative domestic spaces of the shared house and the hotel, as depicted in Elizabeth Bowen’s novels *To the North* (1932) and *The Death of the Heart* (1938). For many young women their independent lives were viewed

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<sup>171</sup> Ayres, pp. 38, 63, 165.

<sup>172</sup> Shields, p.22.

<sup>173</sup> Doreen Massey, ‘Power-geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place’, in *Mapping The Futures: Local Cultures, Global Change*, ed. by Jon Bird and others (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 59-69 (p. 61).

<sup>174</sup> Leonore Davidoff and others, *The Family Story: Blood, Contract and Intimacy* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p. 178.

<sup>175</sup> Ravetz and Turkington, p. 44.

by society as the transitional stage before marriage, making their class position and social status ambiguous. These sections demonstrate how the discourses of transience that surrounded women's temporary accommodation created an anxiety even for the middle-classes about the lack of a stable home, and with it a stable identity. This in turn reflects a much wider concern that underlies transient dwelling spaces, that of homelessness.

## 2.1 The Class Debate and the 1930s

‘England is the most class-ridden country under the sun’

George Orwell, *England Your England*<sup>176</sup>

Bordered by the Wall Street crash at the end of 1929 and the start of the Second World War at the end of 1939, the nineteen thirties is a decade that has strong associative imagery. Period studies of the thirties began to appear as early as 1940, with the publication of *The Long Weekend* by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, and Malcolm Muggeridge's retrospective *The Thirties*, and have continued to be written in every decade since.<sup>177</sup> The prevailing historical narrative of the nineteen thirties has been one of unemployment, the Means Test, and hunger marches, that have led to the period being referred to as ‘the black years, the devil's decade’ and the ‘hungry decade’.<sup>178</sup> With the number of registered unemployed reaching close to three million by December 1932 and not dropping to under two million until December 1935, unemployment was a significant problem in the thirties.<sup>179</sup> Indeed, the real figures are likely to have been even higher as the official figures only showed those on the unemployment register and excluded married women, the self-employed, agricultural workers and those engaged in temporary

<sup>176</sup> George Orwell, *England Your England and Other Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), p. 208.

<sup>177</sup> Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940); Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Thirties: 1930-1940 in Great Britain* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1940).

<sup>178</sup> A. J. P. Taylor, *English History, 1914-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 317; Adrian Caesar, *Dividing Lines: Poetry, Class and Ideology in the 1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), p.10.

<sup>179</sup> Ministry of Labour Gazettes for months concerned quoted in Noreen Branson and Margot Heinemann, *Britain in the Nineteen Thirties* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971) p. 341.

work. The figures were also affected by the introduction of the Means Test in November 1931, which reduced the numbers of long-term unemployed able to continue claiming unemployment benefit. Government benefits for the unemployed were never intended to be ‘a living wage’, something made clear by the Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald in a broadcast to the nation on 25 August 1931.<sup>180</sup>

However, this was not the full story: although unemployment was high, it was uneven. Heavy industries such as coal, shipbuilding, textiles, iron and steel all saw a decline in the thirties, and areas in Wales and the north of England that were centred on these industries suffered from the highest levels of unemployment. Service and distribution industries, based predominately in the south, prospered with increased job opportunities, particularly for women. Indeed, between 1934 and 1937 the British economy actually enjoyed a growth period, and John Stevenson and Chris Cook have argued that ‘Alongside the pictures of the dole queues and hunger marches must also be placed those of another Britain, of new industries, prosperous suburbs and a rising standard of living’.<sup>181</sup>

The standard of living was rising only for those in employment but this was still a fairly large proportion; throughout the thirties there was always at least seventy-five per cent of the population in work.<sup>182</sup> Although wages had remained at the same level, the economic decline meant that the cost of living had fallen, leaving the working population with a greater disposable income. On the 17 May 1930, *The Times* announced the cost of living to be at its lowest since October 1916 and it continued to fall throughout the thirties.<sup>183</sup> Writing in *The Times* in September 1938 John Maynard Keynes stated that between 1924 and 1935 ‘the cost of living fell by 18 ½ per cent., while wages fell by only

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<sup>180</sup> Quoted in Branson and Heinemann, p. 21.

<sup>181</sup> John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *The Slump: Society and Politics During the Depression* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 4.

<sup>182</sup> Caesar, p. 12.

<sup>183</sup> ‘Fall in Cost of Living’, *The Times*, 17 May 1930, p. 12.

5 per cent'.<sup>184</sup> Even among the working classes, standards of living increased and a typical working-class family almost halved the proportion of income taken up with food and rent.<sup>185</sup> Other improved living standards were evident in the growth in consumer goods, particularly time-saving appliances for the house, electrical goods and the ownership of motor vehicles, although these items would only have been affordable for the more affluent classes. Housing standards also improved as slums were cleared and new suburban housing estates developed. A balanced approach therefore needs to be taken that acknowledges the paradox of both mass unemployment and widespread poverty, alongside improved living conditions and greater disposable income.

### **Defining Social Class**

The revision of the collective memory of literary and historical narratives of the nineteen thirties has been an ongoing trend in recent decades in work by both historians and literary critics.<sup>186</sup> However, one of the few myths not refuted by Martin Pugh in his 2008 social history of the interwar years, *We Danced All Night*, was that of a country built and maintained on class divisions: 'Britain remained a very unequal society roughly divided between the eighty per cent defined as manual working class by their occupation, fifteen per cent middle class, and five per cent upper class'.<sup>187</sup>

The meaning of social class, how it is defined, and its relative importance in structuring society had been the subject of endless debates in the Victorian period as rapid social change and a growing middle class transformed the social structures of Britain and brought discussions of class reform to the political agenda. After the upheavals of the

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<sup>184</sup> J. M. Keynes, 'Efficiency in Industry: A Measure of Growth', *The Times*, 13 September 1938, p. 13.

<sup>185</sup> In 1914 a working-class family spent around 60 per cent of its income on food and 16 per cent on rent, by 1937-8 these figures had fallen to 35 per cent and 9 per cent respectively, Stevenson and Cook, p. 18.

<sup>186</sup> See Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: The Dangerous Flood of History* (London: Routledge, 1996); *Women Writers of the Thirties: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. by Maroula Joannou; Martin Pugh, *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* (London: Vintage, 2009); Juliet Gardiner, *The Thirties: An Intimate History* (London: HarperPress, 2010).

<sup>187</sup> Pugh, p. 86.

Great War, class issues were once again at the forefront of social and political debates as commentators began to question assumed class roles and the constructed nature of social class. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines class as a ‘system of ordering society’ where people are divided into strata ‘consisting of people at the same economic level or having the same social status’.<sup>188</sup> Social class is a complex category because it is defined according to various factors, not all of which can be objectively measured. For the purposes of the 1911 Census, social class had been defined in terms of occupation by the Registrar-General in order to group the population from Class I ‘Professional’ to Class V ‘Unskilled Manual’, however many commentators realised that there was more to Britain’s class structure.<sup>189</sup> Writing in 1927, the historians A. M. Carr-Saunders and D. Caradog Jones argued that basing social class on either occupation or income would only produce a study of the distribution of occupation or income, rather than ‘coherent self-conscious groups’ and a valid method for distinguishing social class.<sup>190</sup>

Nevertheless, class has long been viewed as a central concept for organising society. David Cannadine has outlined how as Britons attempted to comprehend the ‘unequal social worlds they have inhabited, settled, and conquered, across the centuries and around the globe’ they created variants of three similar models:

the hierarchical view of society as a seamless web; the triadic version with upper, middle, and lower collective groups; and the dichotomous, adversarial picture, where society is sundered between “us” and “them”.<sup>191</sup>

Ayres’s novel, *The Little Lady in Lodgings* highlights how defining social class, or placing someone within the hierarchy of class, is a complex procedure that is not only based on clearly quantifiable distinctions, but also on the subjective nuances of

<sup>188</sup> Oxford English Dictionary Online, < <http://www.oed.com> > [accessed 18 August 2011]

<sup>189</sup> ‘Class I (wholly non-manual) was ‘Professional’; Class II, ‘Intermediate Income Groups’, Class III, ‘Skilled Occupations’, and Class IV, ‘Partly Skilled Occupations’ were mixed; Class V, ‘Unskilled Occupations’, was wholly manual’ in Asa Briggs, *A Social History of England*, 3rd edn (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 319.

<sup>190</sup> A. M. Carr-Saunders and D. Caradog Jones, *A Survey of the Social Structure of England and Wales* (London: Oxford University Press), p. 319.

<sup>191</sup> David Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 20.

appearance and behaviours. After returning to her grandfather, Sir John Rorley, Sheila meets Lilian Cunningham in the street and Lilian observes, ‘You’re quite different now – even your clothes’. When Sheila had been living in Miss Quince’s boarding house Ayres had highlighted how Sheila’s biggest concern when Lord Ronald invited her to dinner was her lack of appropriate evening clothes: ‘I’ve nothing smart to wear, though. Perhaps I’d better not come’. As well as these visual clues, Sheila’s grandfather ‘had instilled into her the fact that no man could be a gentleman or fit for her to know unless he had a private income, a motor-car, and nothing to do’.<sup>192</sup> These definitions of social class changed very little in the interwar years. By the end of the thirties, contemporary observers such as Gunnar Landtman writing in 1938, stated that there were still unwritten rules governing social class distinctions: ‘Rules and habits without any sanction in law have often proved to be very efficient in maintaining distance between superior and inferior classes’.<sup>193</sup>

Literary writers at the time were particularly attuned to these more pervasive and subtle forms of class determination. In his essay ‘England Your England’ written in 1941, George Orwell argued that class differences had become less pronounced since the Great War, ‘In tastes, habits, manners and outlook the working class and the middle class are drawing together. The unjust distinctions remain, but the real differences diminish’. Although society was still ‘unjust’ in defining people by their social class, it was becoming more difficult to determine the class to which a person belonged. If the Great War had diminished class differences, Orwell was convinced the Second World War would eradicate them completely: ‘This war, unless we are defeated, will wipe out most of the existing class privileges. There are every day fewer people who wish them to continue’.<sup>194</sup> Orwell was not alone in thinking that class privilege would disappear; in

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<sup>192</sup> Ayres, pp. 170, 73, 26.

<sup>193</sup> Gunnar Landtman, *The Origin of the Inequality of the Social Classes* (London: Kegan Paul, 1938) p. 3.

<sup>194</sup> Orwell, ‘England Your England’, pp. 222, 223-4.

1940 Virginia Woolf was also convinced that ‘a world without classes’ would emerge after the war.<sup>195</sup>

However, six years later, in his essay *The English People*, written shortly after the end of the Second World War, Orwell again comments on English class distinctions, but this time he is less certain that class differences are disappearing:

newcomers to England are still astonished and sometimes horrified by the blatant differences between class and class. The great majority of the people can still be “placed” in an instant by their manners, clothes and general appearance. Even the physical type differs considerably, the upper classes being an average several inches taller than the working class. But the most striking difference of all is in language and accent. The English working class, as Mr. Wyndham Lewis has put it, are “branded on the tongue”.<sup>196</sup>

The fact that people could still be ‘placed’ by their accent and appearance indicated that although historians may have been stratifying society by income and occupation, the ordinary person was continuing to perceive class through the unwritten codes of accent, education, taste and appearance. These distinctions are powerful; they define the position of the individual in the class hierarchy, which in turn defines their social place and the viewpoint of their social position.

### **Women and the Spatial Construction of Social Class**

Historically, there has been a tendency to study women as ‘organized groups, distinguished individuals, or as a caste with shared concerns and collective demands’.<sup>197</sup>

It is only recently that women have been studied as family members, or in their relationships to wider political and economic concerns. Single women outside the usual structures for historical analysis (marriage, the family, living in temporary accommodation) have been largely excluded from analysis and debate, as both their work

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<sup>195</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘The Leaning Tower’, in *A Woman’s Essays: Selected Essays Volume One*, ed. by Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 159-78 (p. 175).

<sup>196</sup> Orwell, *The English People* (London: Collins, 1947), p. 10.

<sup>197</sup> Rayna Rapp, Ellen Ross and Renate Bridenthal, ‘Examining Family History’ in *Sex and Class in Women’s History*, ed. by Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan and Judith R. Walkowitz (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), pp. 232-58, (p. 239).

and their accommodation are assumed to be only temporary; an intermediate stage of life between the family of their childhood and their own family on marriage.

As late as 1999, Cannadine stated in the preface to *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain* that he thought ‘it likely that women visualize the social world, and their place within it, in some ways that are different from men’, but conceded that such a “‘serious gap in our knowledge” still awaits its historian’.<sup>198</sup> To consider social class in relation to the boarding house it is necessary to examine how class is spatially constructed, alongside the ways in which women have been socially classified.

Social class is determined by an individual’s spatial location not only in terms of their metaphorical ‘place’ in society, but also their access to and relationship with actual material places. In her 1994 work *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey argued that if space is socially constructed, then it must therefore follow that social phenomena, such as social class, that are created out of the relations and interactions that form social and economic structures, must also have a spatial dimension: ‘The geography of social structure is a geography of class *relations*, not just a map of social classes’ (SPG 22).

Massey pointed to the dependence of social phenomena on their spatial form. For example, in the construction of social class it is necessary to consider both the ‘spatial structure’ and ‘spatial division’ of labour and the power relations inherent in them (SPG 22). Certain types of employment are concentrated in different geographical locations, for example work in the Lancashire textile mills in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Also, within a particular industry, jobs can be spatially divided between those on the factory floor and those in the office. Between the wars, Britain ‘saw a massive social and spatial restructuring of employment’ (SPG 83), as industries such as coal and textiles declined and office and service sector work grew. The workforce became more mobile in order to follow work to the more prosperous towns and cities. Office work was a new

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<sup>198</sup> Cannadine, pp. xiii-xiv.

growth area for female labour in the interwar years as women began to replace the male clerks of the pre-war period and in 1931, forty-two per cent of clerical workers were women.<sup>199</sup>

Women living alone were a problematic category for many forms of social classifications that were dependent on a male head of household for definition. In the thirties, although women had achieved considerable independence, in terms of social class they were deemed to have only a 'derived class position' determined by the class position of the male head of household, either the father or husband.<sup>200</sup> If a woman was living alone and working, her father's social class would still define her and dictate the type of work she could undertake: it was socially unacceptable, as well as highly unlikely, that the daughter of an upper-middle class father would seek work in a factory.

Indeed, to determine a woman's social class according to occupation was problematic due to the limited range of employment women could carry out; it would have led to large numbers of women in a single occupational group who may have little else in common. Geoffrey Crossick has highlighted the particularly gendered nature of identifying occupation with social class. Not only is such a definition predicated on work being full-time and paid, there are ambiguities within the terms used to identify the work, as Crossick explained, 'One clear case is the division between skilled and unskilled workers, for the former were by definition male, and women workers were by definition unskilled, almost regardless of the work-place situation'.<sup>201</sup> It is indicative of the assumption that a woman working and living alone would only be doing so temporarily

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<sup>199</sup> Martin Daunt, *Wealth and Welfare: An economic and Social History of Britain, 1851-1951* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 406.

<sup>200</sup> Pamela Abbott and Roger Sapsford, *Women and Social Class* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987), p. 2.

<sup>201</sup> Geoffrey Crossick, 'From Gentlemen to the Residuum: Languages of Social Description in Victorian Britain' in *Language, History and Class*, ed. by Penelope Corfield (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), pp. 150-78 (p. 176).

before marriage that no effort was made by social historians or Census definitions to consider the need to align the occupations of single women with social class.

The paradox of women's class mobility was that although women were considered to have the opportunity to change their social class through marriage, it was often their social class that dictated their lack of mobility. It was particularly the case for those unmarried daughters left at home who were expected to take on the role of caring for aging family members, while the unmarried son had no such familial constraints and could go anywhere geographically to start a new life or follow work. In the 1930s it was estimated that there were around three hundred thousand single women, without income, caring for elderly parents, often with no legal inheritance rights.<sup>202</sup> The novelist and suffrage activist Ray Strachey argued in 1936 that 'consequently the unmarried daughters – who might be thought to be so exceptionally free and untrammelled – are quite strictly tied down. And as every year of developing communication spreads out the area in which jobs exist, this lack of mobility becomes an increasing handicap'.<sup>203</sup>

Massey is particularly concerned with the ways in which women's spatial mobility has been constrained by gendered power relations that have limited women's ability to effect changes within social structures:

The limitation of women's mobility, in terms both of identity and space, has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination. Moreover, the two things – the limitation on mobility in space, the attempted consignment/confinement to particular places on the one hand, and the limitation of identity on the other – have been crucially related (SPG 179).

Because women have been spatially constrained, not only by their social class, but also geographically in terms of the spaces they could occupy, their occupational opportunities

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<sup>202</sup> Leonore Davidoff, 'The Family in Britain', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950*, vol. 2, ed. by F. M. L. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 71-130 (p. 127).

<sup>203</sup> Ray Strachey, 'Changes in Employment' in *Our Freedom and Its Results by Five Women*, by Eleanor F. Rathbone and others, ed. by Ray Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1936), pp. 119-172 (p. 162). 'Ray' was the nickname of Rachel Costello, who became Strachey on her marriage to Lytton Strachey's brother Oliver in 1911.

and ability to initiate their own movements have been socially and culturally determined. This in turn has affected their ability to create an individual identity.

This emphasis on mobility and individual agency is borne out of Massey's rejection of the construction of static identities in relation to space, and her argument for a more porous and mobile definition. If individuals are able to 'initiate flows and movement' within space they create the possibility to shift their positioning in wider social structures.<sup>204</sup> If one moves out of one's 'place', both metaphorically and materially, one can cross invisible boundaries of definition. However, the ability to change spatial positioning does not necessarily effect positive changes to individual identity. The construction of one's social identity or class positioning is dependent not only upon one's own social actions, but also on how they relate to and are perceived by others within society.

## **2.2 The Boarding House and the 'Loss of Genteel Status' in Stella Gibbons's *Bassett***

The spatial hierarchy and social determinism of class for women can be seen in an examination of the structures and divisions within the boarding house. Although it was theoretically possible for women of all social classes to open their house to boarders, it was primarily the working and lower middle classes for whom it was deemed socially acceptable.

If we reflect back on the idea of the boarding house, conceptualised as a permeable 'complex of mobilities, a nexus of in and out conduits' (POS 93), Lefebvre's terms suggest that the boarding house would enable exactly the type of 'flows and movement' that Massey has outlined.<sup>205</sup> However, while the landlady remains fixed in the material space of her own home, her perceived social status shifts when that home is

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<sup>204</sup> Massey, 'Power-geometry', p. 61.

<sup>205</sup> Massey, 'Power-geometry', p. 61.

transformed into the commercial space of a boarding house. As Davidoff has argued, the women running boarding houses would suffer a similar ‘loss of genteel status’ as her female boarders.<sup>206</sup>

Stella Gibbons’s 1934 novel *Bassett* highlights the class implications for women involved in the everyday management of a boarding house. The novel focuses on the lives of two middle-aged spinsters, Miss Padsoe and Miss Baker. After the death of her father, upper-middle-class Miss Padsoe is unable to afford the upkeep of her large house, ‘The Tower’, near Reading and places an advertisement for a lady companion ‘with some capital’ to help convert her home into a boarding house.<sup>207</sup> She receives a response from Miss Baker, who in her twenty-one years as a pattern cutter, and following the death of her own parents, has amassed savings of three hundred and eighty pounds. After being given notice by her employer, who is making staff cuts, Miss Baker is unable to find another position and is finally convinced to leave her London lodging house and move in with Miss Padsoe. Gibbons positions the two women at opposing ends of the class spectrum, contrasting the upper-middle-class Miss Padsoe with the working-class Miss Baker. The narrative is structured around the evolving relationship between the two women and the negotiations of their class distinctions within the space of the boarding house.

In *Bassett*, the erosion of genteel status is demonstrated acutely in the character of Miss Padsoe, and is effected in the narrative primarily through the reactions of her neighbours, highlighting how social classes are ‘constituted *in relation to each other*’ (SPG 86) and in particular to the wider community. Gibbons points to the irony of the distressed gentlewoman, that when living in poverty and being starved and ill-treated by her tyrannical servants, Miss Padsoe’s class status is unquestioned; however, once Miss

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<sup>206</sup> Leonore Davidoff, ‘The Separation of Home and Work?’, p. 68.

<sup>207</sup> Stella Gibbons, *Bassett* (1934; repr. London: Longmans, 1935), p. 8. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with B.

Baker arrives and the servants are turned away and the house opened to boarders, her upper-middle-class neighbours express their disapproval:

Now what would that poor old Mr Padsoe have said, could he have seen his child trying to keep a lodging house? She is quite mad. I shall speak to the Vicar. She should be put away; it is not safe for us all (B 154).

The hyperbole of this statement, that Miss Padsoe should be ‘put away’ because she has become unsafe for the neighbourhood, suggests two things: first that Miss Padsoe’s boarding house is placing the respectability of the community as a whole in jeopardy; and second, that the only plausible explanation for Miss Padsoe’s independent action, after years as a dutiful daughter, can be madness.

The neighbour’s use of the term ‘lodging house’ can be read as a deliberate reference to the ‘common’ lodging house and the associations with squalor, the lower classes, and immorality. Miss Padsoe and Miss Baker always refer to their venture by the more reputable term of ‘boarding’ house, as the provision of a meal and common areas for boarders to socialise was intended to mimic the comforts of home. The type of boarding house was an indicator of social status, the working-class woman who took one or two boarders into her home catered for the lower classes, while the family home that had been converted into a business with private bedrooms and public sitting-room and dining room, was likely to be a more ‘genteel’ establishment. Middle-class women, who could no longer afford to maintain an independent household after the death of a father or husband, often ran these houses. Of the 68,728 women lodging and boarding house keepers recorded in the 1931 Census, 49,793 were widowed, divorced or had never married.<sup>208</sup> In a 1935 publication, *Hotel and Boarding House Management For Small Establishments*, the author describes many of the women running boarding houses as

Widows who have been left with a small capital and the need to maintain their own position of economic security seek to escape the sorrows of recent

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<sup>208</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1931: Occupation Tables*, p. 13.

bereavement, at the same time finding a new status of independence, in the Promised Land of hotel or boarding house proprietorship.<sup>209</sup>

However, despite the insistence by Miss Padsoe and Miss Baker that they are running a genteel boarding house for a better class of clientele, a house full of paying boarders is clearly different from entertaining houseguests, something their neighbours do frequently. Indeed, the term paying guest or ‘PG’ was often used to suggest a more genteel form of lodging, although even that made the middle-classes uncomfortable, as demonstrated in Patrick Hamilton’s novel *Craven House* (1926) when Miss Hatt discusses opening her home to boarders:

Even so delicate shirking of the issue as was conveyed in the expression Paying Guest, was distasteful [...] and Mr Spicer was content to allude very distantly to an Agreement, an Arrangement, or an Understanding. ‘Three guineas, or something like that...’ murmured Miss Hatt, with shuddering timidity...<sup>210</sup>

As Massey has highlighted, when there are ‘multiple meanings of places, held by different social groups, [...] then the question of which identity is dominant will be the result of social negotiation and conflict’ (SPG 141). The dominant identity is the one given by those who can confidently define others against themselves; whose superiority stems from their own comfort and security in their social positioning. Gibbons shows that Miss Padsoe is clearly defined as upper-middle-class while in a position of stasis, but once she initiates the ‘flows and movement’ of inviting Miss Baker into her home, and converting that home into a boarding house, it effects a change to her class positioning.<sup>211</sup>

This underlines how spatial boundaries might enforce class stability. A woman’s social status, as well as being determined by the male head of household, was also shaped by her ability to live privately within the confines of the home. By opening up the house to strangers, the boundaries between home and work break down and rather than creating

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<sup>209</sup> S. W. W., p. 9.

<sup>210</sup> Patrick Hamilton, *Craven House* (1926; repr. London: Black Spring Press, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>211</sup> Massey, ‘Power-geometry’, p. 61.

new boundaries ‘the vicissitudes of boardinghouse life created confusion about where those boundaries were to be found’.<sup>212</sup>

In her discussion of apartment buildings in nineteenth-century Paris and London, Sharon Marcus has pointed out how the fluidity of these new spaces with their shared entrances, staircases, and walls made ‘urban and domestic spaces continuous’.<sup>213</sup> This process is accentuated in the boarding house, suggesting that the routines and activities applicable to urban public life such as the exchange of labour for goods and services, what Lefebvre would term ‘spatial practices’, become relevant to the domestic space of the house.

The commercial aspect of women renting out rooms tainted the private house with the market place, particularly for middle-class women who were discouraged from operating within this public space. In their work on class divisions, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have demonstrated how the notion of separate spheres was a construct for a nineteenth-century middle-class ideal that masked the reality of the division between home and work, for the middle-class home was built and sustained on the labour of women: ‘Public men were constantly cared for and serviced by wives, daughters, sisters and female servants’.<sup>214</sup> This model of middle-class behaviour was transferred to the boarding house where the male boarder was ‘serviced’ by his landlady and her servants. However, unlike the middle-class family member or servant, the landlady operated in both the public and private realm, and often had more control in the private sphere of the home over her boarders’ behaviour than a wife would over her household.

The commercial market place also had connotations of display; not only is the landlady displaying her home, but she is also placing herself on display. Gibbons

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<sup>212</sup> Gamber, p. 94.

<sup>213</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 3.

<sup>214</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 33.

demonstrates that while Miss Baker may consider that ‘a good address makes such a difference’ (B 154), it is clearly not acceptable practice for someone of Miss Padsoe’s social standing to advertise her home address as a boarding house in the newspaper.

The usual method for the middle classes was to make discreet enquiries among friends. Papers archived in The Women’s Library, London, provide the example of Miss Stone, who in 1907 wrote to her friend: ‘If you should ever hear of a lady wishing to live in this neighbourhood (between Highgate Road and Dartmouth Park) I wish you would kindly think of me. I have more rooms than I require and would like to sub-let three unfurnished’.<sup>215</sup> It is notable that Miss Stone makes no mention of money in her letter; her desire to sub-let her rooms is due, she claims, to having more space than she requires, rather than a need for additional income. Miss Padsoe’s neighbours, therefore, might read Miss Padsoe’s advertisement as a public declaration not only of a socially unacceptable endeavour, but also of a vulgar need for money.

Though the declining fortunes of the upper classes after the war led to many living on lower incomes than those of the classes below, it was not a thing to be mentioned by even the most impoverished. Miss Padsoe’s lack of understanding of these unwritten class rules underlines how securely established she had always assumed her class position to be. It also points to the inherent paradox in social classifications, which allow Miss Padsoe to maintain the class status of her father when she has no money, but she must relinquish it when she becomes economically independent.

### **2.3 Signifiers of Social Class: Landladies, Servants, and Female Boarders**

Massey points out that social classes are ‘not structured as blocks which exist as discrete entities in society, but are precisely constituted *in relation to* each other’ (SPG 86). Miss

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<sup>215</sup> Letter from Miss Jean Stone to Miss Strachey, 25 October 1907, Ref: 9/01/0345, Box: AL 2, Archive and Museum Collection, The Women’s Library, London.

Baker and Miss Padsoe exhibit acute feelings of class discomfort towards each other from their initial meeting, and all their subsequent arrangements for the boarding house are encumbered by class distinctions. Miss Baker's positioning is initially ambiguous; in contributing towards financing the boarding house she is entering into a business partnership with Miss Padsoe, suggesting a level of equality. But as a working-class woman arriving at Miss Padsoe's imposing upper-middle-class house, Miss Baker is clearly not entering the house as an equal, and even her conversation with Miss Padsoe's parlour maid is uncertain: 'A lady would have said "That will do." Miss Baker did not know what to say, so she just stared' (B 24). Miss Padsoe is equally uncomfortable with Miss Baker, and the thought of a 'gently bred person' (B 33) like herself asking a stranger for money makes the situation increasingly strained. As a lady, Miss Padsoe is unable to mention money and is forced to await Miss Baker's forthright mention of the subject. The awareness of the class differential is heightened for Miss Padsoe, who is painfully conscious of

the fact that if this interview had been taking place thirty years ago, Miss Padsoe would have been interviewing Miss Baker as a prospective house-parlourmaid, and Miss Baker would have been m'ming her. The War, a bared sword, lay between 1903 and 1933, but Miss Padsoe had never quite taken in the War, somehow. She missed the m'ming' (B 27).

There is a deliberate awkwardness about Gibbons's creation and use of the verb 'm'ming' that reflects the uneasy relationship Gibbons wants to establish between the two women. It shows that Miss Padsoe missed the deference bestowed by the term, and also perhaps the type of conversation that would ensue. The person who is 'm'ming' can only respond in acquiescence and was unable to voice any contrary opinions. However, in conversation with Miss Baker, who is vociferous in her views, Miss Padsoe is forced to engage in a different type of conversation, one of debate and negotiation, with which she is clearly uncomfortable. Miss Padsoe's discomfort is made historically specific by Gibbons, who has her character make frequent references to the war throughout the novel

to stress the changing nature of social interactions, particularly between the lady of the house and her servants.

After the Great War the middle and upper classes had felt vulnerable to a potential ‘uprising’ from the lower classes, something that was witnessed with the class confrontations of the General Strike in 1926. Carr-Saunders and Caradog Jones wrote in 1927 that they were hearing ‘much more about “class consciousness” and “class warfare”’.<sup>216</sup> This was not a new phenomenon, but one that was differently inflected after the war when the boundaries between the social classes seemed no longer as clearly defined.

Within the middle-class household there had been significant changes. The numbers in domestic service declined following the end of the Great War and the nature of their employment began to change radically as servants increasingly began ‘living out’, rather than being resident in their employer’s home, thus establishing spatial boundaries between themselves and their employer.<sup>217</sup> Although domestic service continued to be the largest source of employment for single women in the 1930s, it was an occupation in sharp decline, with the numbers of women employed down from 2,127,000 in 1911 to 1,845,000 by 1921.<sup>218</sup> Domestic service with its long hours and poor pay was becoming increasingly unattractive to women, particularly working-class women who could now work in factories with better pay and conditions. For older women, employment options were also increasing and although forty-seven per cent of all women servants were over the age of thirty, many older, single women were realising they had greater opportunities in the new industries.<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Carr-Saunders and Caradog Jones, p. 70.

<sup>217</sup> Davidoff and others, *The Family Story*, p.29.

<sup>218</sup> Jane Lewis, ‘In Search of a Real Equality: Women Between the Wars’ in *Class, Culture and Social Change: A New View of the 1930s*, ed. by Frank Gloversmith (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), pp. 208-39 (p. 211).

<sup>219</sup> Holden, p. 158.

In Gibbons's novel, the 'm'ming' is missed all the more by Miss Padsoe as her two servants have been exerting a domineering rule over her and creating divisions within the house that establish their own private space, leaving Miss Padsoe in an uncertain position in relation to her own home: "I am, of course, *mistress* of the house because I *own* it, but I am afraid I am not always *altogether* mistress . . . that is, I am afraid I have allowed Winifred and her mother *far too much freedom*" (B 82). Miss Padsoe is aware of the authority that ownership of the house should bestow, but she is unable to exert it over her two servants, Winifred and Winifred's mother. Miss Padsoe justifies her lack of power to Miss Baker by suggesting that 'after all, one expects *really* good servants to be a little *tyrannical*' (B 43). By making this statement Miss Padsoe flaunts the class divide between the two women; with no knowledge of the habits of servants Miss Baker is unable to challenge the idea of the tyrannical nature of '*really* good servants'.

Miss Padsoe's servants employ the form of spatial power relationships defined by de Certeau as 'tactics': they manipulate the space of their employment for their own gain through the practice of *la perruque* (the wig), that is, 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer' (PEL 25). Although it could be argued that Gibbons shows Miss Padsoe's servants making very little attempt to disguise their tactics, the illusion is maintained that they are performing their role as servants due to Miss Padsoe's refusal to acknowledge the situation. De Certeau argues that 'the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time' (PEL 25), rather than goods. The servants divert their time away from Miss Padsoe's housekeeping without physically being absent from their job. On the surface the servants appear to cook, clean and perform the household tasks expected of them, but Miss Baker notices at once the layer of dust on the furniture. Tactics are employed by ordinary people to reappropriate space through the conversion of the regulations imposed on that space. Ironically, Gibbons has Miss Padsoe explain that her inability to discipline or dismiss her servants is due to the fact that they have

appropriated her house so well: ‘Winifred and her mother have been with me for two years, and they have come to look on The Tower as their *home*, rather than a “*place*”’(B 83), in other words, rather than only a site of work.

However, the servants’ attempts to appropriate their anonymous ‘place’ of employment into a home show that their tactics are exerted only within the limited spatial boundaries of their positions. Although the servants give Miss Padsoe the impression of having made The Tower their home, they actually only appropriate one room within the house: the kitchen. This is the room that Miss Padsoe never enters and so it can be completely their own space; kept clean and warm while the rest of the house remains cold and dusty.

Gibbons highlights how Miss Padsoe’s class positioning and upbringing make the idea of turning the servants out of her home seem impossible: “‘just supposing I *were* to try to get rid of Winifred and her mother?’” (and Miss Padsoe’s face expressed the liveliest fear and dismay at the prospect, mingled with longing)’ (B43). The ‘liveliest fear and dismay’ is both at the prospect that she will have to be drawn into a vulgar confrontation with her servants and the prospect of having to manage for herself if they were to go. However, no matter how ‘lively’ this fear and dismay is, it is also ‘mingled with longing’ at the idea of being free from their tyrannical rule and regaining her home as her own. Virginia Woolf had similar class discomforts at dealing with her servants, in a letter to Ethel Smyth on 16 October 1930, Woolf writes, ‘have I ever felt such wild misery as when talking to servants? – partly caused by rage at our general ineptitude – we the governors – at having laden ourselves with such a burden’.<sup>220</sup>

In contrast, Gibbons shows that Miss Baker has no anxiety about dealing with the servants once she has moved into The Tower and established her position of power over

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<sup>220</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Vol. IV, 1929-31*, ed. by Nigel Nicholson (London: Hogarth Press, 1994), p. 230. For more on Woolf and her relationship with her servants see Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London: Penguin, 2008).

them. Miss Baker is able to operate on two levels with the servants; on the first level she is acting on behalf of Miss Padsoe and so is given the authority to turn them away, and on the second level, coming from the same class as the servants, she is able to speak to them fluently in their own dialect: ‘Miss Padsoe’s given you the sack. She don’t want ever to see you again, neither of you’ (B 122). Gibbons refers frequently to Miss Baker’s cockney accent in the text and this scene shows the similarity between Miss Baker’s speech and that of Winifred who wonders: ‘Ow’m I to get my box ‘ome?’ (B 123) as she stares at the heavy box of her belongings that Miss Baker has dragged onto the lawn. The short, abrupt sentences, full of contracted words that form the conversation between Miss Baker and Winifred are also in stark contrast to the well-bred and slightly nervous verbosity emanating from Miss Padsoe. Miss Baker’s power comes from perceiving her ‘place’ within the new spatial location of The Tower and of establishing that space by the removal of the servants who threaten her new social stability.

### **Upstairs and Downstairs: Spatial Classifications**

It is the kitchen, the room the servants had most successfully appropriated, where Miss Baker feels most comfortable. Miss Baker has spent twenty-one years living in a single room in a lodging house, and a kitchen as a separate room, rather than ‘two gas rings’ (B 148), is a luxury. The kitchen evokes feelings of comfort for Miss Baker, who notices the difference between this room and the rest of the cold, comfortless house: ‘A fire purred in the large gleaming range, a rag rug and a cuckoo clock pleased her at once [...] Everything was clean’ (B 114). In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard recounts Henry Thoreau’s comparison of a woodpecker taking possession of an entire tree for its home with ‘the joy of a family that returns to live in a house it has long since abandoned’, and the ‘smoke from the kitchen fire’ at the heart of the house being one of the things that alerts the neighbours to the change from abandoned to inhabited space (PS 96). When Miss Baker

takes possession of the entire house from the servants, she is unconscious of the class boundaries imposed by the kitchen; Miss Padsoe, however, is alarmed at this rapid change in spatial appropriation, and tries to

repress a qualm at undoubted indications that Miss Baker was about to give her a warm-up in front of the kitchen fire. It was a year since Miss Padsoe had been in the kitchen; it was a place of dread to her because of the two who reigned in it, and this, added to an Edwardian gentlewoman's natural state of genteel inexperience about kitchens, made her almost anxious not to go down into it (B 118).

Gibbons suggests that to 'go down into' the kitchen is to descend to the realms of the unknown within the house. Spatially the house is divided for Miss Padsoe who is used to different classes occupying different spaces within the home. This is emphasised in the name 'The Tower', which implies not only a spatial hierarchy, but also a great distance between the upper and lower levels. Amanda Vickery has outlined how as the home was transformed from a space where the gentry and their servants lived side by side, to a private family space in the nineteenth century, architectural changes were made to separate the owners of the house from their domestic staff with the introduction of back stairs, attics, and separate annexes.<sup>221</sup> The division of labour within the house is mapped onto this spatial structure as Massey has pointed out, creating a 'geography of power relations' within the home (SPG 22). After the servants have gone, Miss Padsoe is forced to take advantage of these spatial power structures in order to regain control over her own home. To do this she must negotiate herself spatially out of the kitchen and return to her life on the upper floors. She does this by suggesting the introduction of a servant to the household, Mrs Partner, who had cleaned the house in Miss Padsoe's father's time:

Miss Padsoe said this with seeming artlessness but with actual guile, for she disliked extremely this living in the kitchen to which Miss Baker took so naturally and joyously, and wished very much to return to her former existence in the airy, icy drawing-room and bedroom. [...] she thought that if Mrs Partner came, the mistress of the house and her guest would naturally retreat upstairs to their proper realm (B 150-51).

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<sup>221</sup> Vickery, p. 27.

The necessity of moving herself from the space of the kitchen ‘to return to her former existence’ as ‘mistress of the house’, and thus to reaffirm her class identity and her control over the space of the house, initiates Miss Padsoe’s elevation of Miss Baker’s position within the spatial hierarchy of the house to ‘guest’ and her assertion of ‘*their* proper realm’ [emphasis mine] being upstairs. Despite her dismay that Miss Baker looks ‘exactly like an under-housemaid’ (B 78), Gibbons shows that the only way Miss Padsoe can live with Miss Baker is by redefining her against the system with which she is comfortable. Miss Padsoe’s plan is successful in spatial terms, for when Mrs Partner arrives and takes over the kitchen in her position as servant, ‘Miss Baker and Miss Padsoe retreated to the drawing-room and took up their position as ladies’ (B 153).

Gibbons makes it clear that these spatial changes are only superficial; Miss Baker may move through the house with the freedom of a lady, but ‘a lady does not spend whole mornings nosing into someone else’s cupboards, and Miss Baker did’ (B 152). This nosiness is defined as a lower-class habit, but it could also be read as Miss Baker’s way of feeling at home within *The Tower*. Bachelard has argued that the inner space of ‘Wardrobes with their shelves, desks with their drawers, and chests with their false bottoms [...] is also *intimate space*, space that is not open to just anyone’ (PS 78). Miss Baker’s nosing into cupboards can also be seen as a form of appropriation, a way of making the space her own by opening up these intimate spaces within the house. Once she knows what these hidden spaces contain, that knowledge becomes a way of mentally owning the contents. Bachelard argues that a ‘lock is a psychological threshold’ (PS 81), once the house holds no more secrets from Miss Baker, it is as if there are no more boundaries for her to cross and the house can become her own.

The changes wrought by inhabited space are a central theme in *Bassett*. The transformative effects of *The Tower* on Miss Baker are created through the physicality of

her new space and its expansiveness after the confines of her four walls: ‘She enjoyed the spaciousness, too. She had lived for fifteen years in one room, but now roamed from bedroom to hall, from garden to kitchen’ (B 152). This freedom to roam after living ‘as narrowly as a mouse in its hole’ (B 3) in her single lodging house room means that Miss Baker ‘no longer looked quite so suspiciously and belligerently at people’ (B 187) and that she has also escaped her slavery to ‘the economic machine’ (B 152). Hannah Arendt has made the distinction between labour and work, describing labour as activities that ‘were undertaken not for their own sake but in order to provide the necessities of life’, in contrast work is an individualizing occupation that ‘transcends both the sheer functionalism of things produced for consumption and the sheer utility of objects produced for use’.<sup>222</sup> Although Miss Baker is working hard in her new employment, she is doing so with a new freedom, for the work is on her own terms and she will directly benefit from the products of her labour. However, she has ingrained habits and is unable to escape her old life completely: she ‘was a creature of twenty years’ office routine and lived by the clock’ (B 151). Gibbons shows how Miss Baker brings her adherence to routine to The Tower, mapping her former office routine onto her new life, spatialising time for herself and Miss Padsoe with meticulous detail to prescribe the hours for eating, working, and tea breaks, and blurring the spatio-temporal boundaries between the work and home space.

Both characters modify their social place by changing their physical space: Miss Baker by making a geographical shift of location and transforming herself from lodger to landlady, and Miss Padsoe by changing the nature of her space, from home to work. In doing so, both move along the spatial hierarchy of class positioning, but while the working-class Miss Baker makes a spatial shift that relocates her further up the class ladder, Miss Padsoe has moved irrevocably downwards. In elevating Miss Baker,

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<sup>222</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 83, 173.

Gibbons acutely demonstrates how Miss Padsoe loses the authority of her own class position. The boarding house is a success in business terms, but it is impossible for the women to overcome societal divisions of class and gender. Massey has argued that ‘the specificity of place also derives from the fact that each place is the focus of a distinct *mixture* of wider and more local social relations’ and the intersecting and juxtaposition of these relations.<sup>223</sup> Miss Padsoe’s physical labour converts her into a landlady rather than a lady; she becomes someone who works for a living and is defined by their work. While the boarding house creates an empowering environment for both women, for Miss Padsoe, initiating this movement towards individual agency is achieved only by the forfeiting of her class privilege and at the loss of her respectability and genteel status.

### **The Landlady and Her Female Boarders**

The arrival of the boarders in *Bassett* produces a new gendering of the space within the house as it is adapted to accommodate men. Mr Mildmay is the first boarder to arrive at The Tower and is given a defining role in the household structure: ‘the best bedroom which used to belong to Miss Padsoe’s father’ (B 153). As the ‘man’ of the house, Mr Mildmay is treated as an honoured guest and he changes the space of the house by altering the routines of the two women. They no longer have the freedom of the house, the walls and door separating his room from the rest of the house now form a boundary that turn that area into his private space, which Miss Baker and Miss Padsoe can enter only in order to administer to his needs: to clean or to bring food.

The other boarders at The Tower consist of six men from Reading University, two of whom are Indians. This was common in university towns and in places close to London where there was a higher proportion of students and people from overseas seeking temporary accommodation. Opening up the home invested the landlady with a

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<sup>223</sup> Massey, ‘Power-geometry’, p. 68.

new form of spatial control; although they might be limited to the space of the home, they could occupy a powerful position within that space, to a large extent being able to choose the type of boarder they would rent to and discriminate against those they deemed unsuitable. This power again demonstrates how within the appropriated space of the boarding house the landlady could create her own dominated space. When she takes on the role of landlady, Miss Baker is quite adamant that they will not be renting rooms out to women boarders, only to men, the ideal boarder being ‘a quiet gentleman, who should pay them two and a half guineas a week’ (B 153).

Historical material can elucidate a greater understanding of Miss Baker’s dislike of women boarders, which seems indicative of a wider trend among landladies in the thirties. According to a 1936 study conducted on behalf of The Over Thirty Association on the housing problem of lower-paid single women workers in London, many single women found it difficult to obtain rooms because landladies preferred to rent to single men, rather than women:

The secretaries of several Housing Associations and Trusts specifically recommended hostels as being more suitable accommodation for single women, and stressed the undesirability of women living alone. Pursued further this was found, in at least two cases, to be a veiled reference to propriety.<sup>224</sup>

It seems surprising that landladies, seventy-two per cent of whom were single woman or widows, would prefer to open their homes to single men, rather than to other women.<sup>225</sup>

The ‘veiled reference to propriety’ was likely to be connected to the fact that the landlady’s own respectability was tied to the propriety of her boarding house. A landlady might fear that with a house full of single women she could be accused of running a house of ill-repute, as many common lodging houses were known to be only thinly disguised brothels.<sup>226</sup> The recommendation that hostels would be ‘more suitable’, suggests that in

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<sup>224</sup> Tweedy, p. 22.

<sup>225</sup> Census of England and Wales 1931: Occupation Tables, p. 13.

<sup>226</sup> Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 11.

these institutions women could be monitored, echoing Christabel Osborn's article in the *Contemporary Review* in June 1911 that women living alone 'would be wholly uncontrolled from morning to night'.<sup>227</sup> The concern with propriety may also be due to the wider disapproval directed towards the trend for independence that working women living alone embodied, and that continued to go against the prevailing views of society that women should be at home with their families until marriage. This independence and lack of adherence to social norms was seen as a lack of respectability: it was not considered 'proper' for women to live alone and a landlady would not want to be seen to publicly endorse such a lifestyle.

The study conducted for the Over Thirty Association interviewed two hundred and thirty-nine single women ('clerks, typists, cashiers, shop assistants, nurses, musicians, teachers, actresses, and so forth'), who lived alone in rooms, without any family 'upon which [they] could fall back'.<sup>228</sup> These interviews uncovered evidence that while landladies were happy to cook, clean and do laundry for their male boarders, these services were withheld from female boarders, or only available at additional cost, as one woman living in Kensington commented:

I thought she might have let me have it for 8/6 for I have to find my own gas. There is a man on the floor below who pays 9/6, inclusive of light, and she cooks his meals, and sees to laundry of bed linen for that, but she does nothing except take down the rubbish for me. She doesn't want women.<sup>229</sup>

The author of the 1935 publication, *Hotel and Boarding House Management*, also endorsed the opinion that women were not wanted:

It is very often the case that women residents are very unpopular in hotels and boarding houses. One cannot help but think that a big reason for this is that so many boarding house proprietors are women. True, the female resident is much more difficult to cater for than the male. It is also true that they seek many privileges which men would never expect. Yet their difficulties do not seem to be generally understood. A woman is a born house-keeper, and it goes very much

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<sup>227</sup> Osborn, p.709.

<sup>228</sup> Tweedy, p. 11.

<sup>229</sup> Tweedy, p. 29.

against the grain with her that, having no house of her own to look after, she should be compelled to live in the house of another.<sup>230</sup>

The suggestion at first seems to be that the female boarder will somehow compete with her landlady over housekeeping chores, but the author goes on to elaborate that it is because of her 'born house-keeper' mentality that the woman boarder will break the rules of boarding house living:

For instance, it is quite natural that she should want to do much of her own laundering; as natural to her as it would be unnatural to a man. That the bathroom is not the place to wash clothing, and the bed-blankets are not intended for ironing blankets, or the lighting connections not intended for electric irons is all taken for granted.<sup>231</sup>

The author refers to these domestic activities as the 'secret practices' that often result in 'broken flex, broken globes and scorched blankets'.<sup>232</sup> This narrative that the author of *Hotel and Boarding House Management* provides of women's natural instinct for domestic self-sufficiency indicates a considerable misunderstanding of the social, cultural and economic differences between male and female boarders. Women were often not provided with the same services as male boarders, and even if those services were available, their cost as 'extras' to their weekly bill would ensure that they were unable to afford them. The Over Thirty Association study confirmed this, one respondent commented that all the women in her lodgings 'seem to pay higher than the men, but for the men she washes and mends and takes messages'.<sup>233</sup> Unable to afford to send their clothes out to the laundry, or pay her landlady for this service, the boarder's only choice is to attempt to wash her garments herself:

In a small bed-sitting room, keeping one's clothes clean is a very real problem for those of slender means. When a woman cannot afford a fire to get clothes dry, and has no space to spread them out, they may hang about for days.<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> S. W. W., p. 45.

<sup>231</sup> S. W. W., p. 46.

<sup>232</sup> S. W. W., p. 46.

<sup>233</sup> Tweedy, p. 28.

<sup>234</sup> Tweedy, pp. 26-7.

Rules and regulations carefully defined the behaviour of boarders and lodgers, indeed, as Mrs Cecil Chesterton had noted with surprise when she frequented, for research, a number of common lodging houses in 1925, that ‘nowhere is a more rigid code of etiquette exacted than in a common lodging-house’.<sup>235</sup> These rules were frequently class-based, but because the definitions of social class were so difficult to classify even the legal situation was poorly defined. In a 1925 book, *The Boarding-House Proprietor and His Guest*, the author C. G. Moran outlines that the boarder ‘undertakes to behave himself properly, or at all events, not outrageously, and in substantial accordance with the conventions of the class of people who frequent the house, and that this is a condition of the contract’.<sup>236</sup> Although the subjective nature of such a contract would make such class-based behaviour difficult to enforce.

As has been discussed in the previous chapter, the female-only accommodation, such as the residential club or hostel, which the Housing Associations and Trusts ‘specifically recommended’ was often out of the price range of many working women. They were also class-determined, as the potential residents were selected based on their occupationally defined social class. The 1939 handbook of *Hostels in London for Professional and Working Women and Girls* had tabulated lists of accommodation that included among the name, address, description and cost of the room, a column listing the ‘class’ of women the rooms were let to, such as: ‘working girls’, ‘students’, ‘teachers and clerks’, ‘educated women workers’. These classifications broadly mapped onto social classes, ‘working girls’ were from the working and lower-middle classes, while ‘educated women workers’ were middle-class women. These definitions would not only exclude those outside a particular class, but also those who were not working and therefore were debarred from all the categories. The majority of hostels required references and also

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<sup>235</sup> Mrs Cecil Chesterton, *In Darkest London* (London: Stanley Paul & Co, 1926), p. 47.

<sup>236</sup> C. G. Moran, *The Boarding-House Proprietor and His Guest* (Manchester: W. Paterson, 1925), p. 23.

stipulated that the women must be under thirty or thirty-five years old.<sup>237</sup> But while Hostels and Residential club listings specifically for women and girls continued to be published until the end of the nineteen sixties, there appears to be no publication targeted specifically at men, perhaps because men's higher salaries opened up a wider choice of privately rented accommodation.

Representational space, the third of Lefebvre's categories, is the lived social space appropriated by the inhabitants and users of space. Even when inhabiting the same space, men and women understand that space differently, appropriate it in different ways and ascribe different meanings to it. In relation to the boarding house, the power relations of appropriated space within dominated space have already been discussed, but these become further complicated when considered in relation to gender. There are the inherent power relations that exist between those inhabiting the same space, and male and female boarders will have different interactions with the owner of the boarding house. Many landladies attempted to create an illusion of home for their male boarders by offering the services of support and care that would usually be provided by a wife. In return the landlady, especially if she was single, might derive a certain degree of safety and protection from having a man in the house. There were no similar advantages for the landlady in having a female boarder. Becoming the approximation of a wife to her male boarders would not affect a landlady's social status, however, by treating a female boarder in the same way, the landlady would become the equivalent of a servant.

Lefebvre argues that the passivity of the users of space is reinforced by the 'connotative discourses' (POS 56) concerning places that generate conventions of agreed behaviour. Shirley Ardener explores this in *Women and Space*, her examination of the way space is partitioned along gendered lines, the 'ground rules' that determine the

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<sup>237</sup> *Handbook of Information as to Residential Clubs and Hostels Providing Accommodation for Women and Girls* (London: 1939).

boundaries and occupants of social space, and the ‘social maps’ that are consequently produced. The very definition of a space as belonging to either man or woman or being either masculine or feminine will influence all subsequent experiences of that space and label behaviour accordingly: ‘once space has been bounded and shaped it is no longer merely a neutral background: it exerts its own influence’.<sup>238</sup> Thus, although a landlady may not specifically state that she only takes male boarders, her preferences are enforced by her behaviour towards her female boarders.

Another reason for landladies preferring male boarders that does not appear to have been acknowledged in the historical material, is the need to keep a spatial as well as an emotional distance between the personae of landlady and the boarder. In Gibbons’s novel this is particularly true for Miss Baker, who is not far removed from the life of a boarder herself, having lived in ‘one room’ (B 4) in a London lodging house for twenty-one years prior to coming to The Tower. Gibbons draws attention to the irony of the situation, that despite coming from a lodging house herself, Miss Baker has decided that they will not rent to women: “‘Ladies give trouble,’” said Miss Baker decidedly, with dim memories of ladies who had done this in her mother’s boarding-house. “‘Finnicky, ladies are. Can’t eat this and can’t bear the other. Besides, they always make a fuss about their bills”” (B 153). Miss Baker creates a distance from herself and the ‘ladies’ who ‘give trouble’, echoing the opinions of many of the landladies quoted in the Over Thirty Association’s study: ‘I’d rather have a man any day, they’re less trouble and have more money’.<sup>239</sup> The perceived troublesome nature of single women in lodgings has been a long-standing trope in popular literature. In Laura M. Lane’s popular novel of 1891, *Mrs Lupton’s Lodgings*, the Bloomsbury landlady Mrs Lupton recounts to her friend how she

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<sup>238</sup> Shirley Ardener, *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (Oxford: Berg, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>239</sup> Tweedy, p. 30-31.

has taken in Miss Seymour: 'I've gone and taken a lady lodger! You know I said I never would again; the last one was such a plague!'<sup>240</sup>

As older, single women, without occupations, both Miss Padsoe and Miss Baker would have trouble securing rooms in the nineteen thirties. Although Gibbons characterises Miss Padsoe as someone with little idea of the commercial aspect of running a boarding house, she does demonstrate Miss Padsoe's awareness that in her reduced financial circumstances it could be her alone in a single room:

And of course, I am luckier than some . . . When I think of poor Augusta Warrender . . . so dreadful. All alone in that little room, and no one knowing about her, and she used to be the dearest girl . . . (B 40).

Miss Padsoe's anxiety is generated by imagining the horror of being physically abandoned with 'no one knowing about her'. Gibbons implies that it is Augusta's physical space, the occupation of that 'little room', which has had such a profound effect. The smallness of her living space has limited the boundaries of Augusta's social space. Miss Padsoe's contrast of Augusta before the move, when she 'used to be the dearest girl . . . so bright and gay', with her present isolation, suggests that she no longer exists and has also slipped from the memories of any former friends and been forgotten by society as a whole. Living in the transient space of the boarding house has reduced Augusta's mobility and effectively imprisoned her spatially within her four walls. For a landlady, the fear of having that constant reminder of what could become of a woman in reduced circumstances 'alone in that little room' reflected back at her daily may indeed be another reason to avoid female boarders.

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<sup>240</sup> Laura M. Lane, *Mrs. Lupton's Lodgings* (London: S. W. Partridge & Co, 1891), p. 26.

#### 2.4 ‘Houses Shared with Women are Built on Sand’: Elizabeth Bowen, *To the North*

Prior to the Great War there had been strong disapproval of middle-class women earning their own living. In 1936 Ray Strachey wrote with heavy irony about the middle-class woman that ‘it was the mark of her class that she had white and useless hands, and was supported by someone else’.<sup>241</sup> By the end of the war the situation was beginning to change: Robert Graves and Alan Hodge commented in *The Long Weekend*, their social history of the interwar years published in 1940, that ‘after the war, daughters [of the middle-classes] were expected to take up business careers, or at least to do *something*’. Although this was in many respects a new freedom for women, it was only considered temporary, ‘an interval between school and marriage’, before they were expected to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers.<sup>242</sup> The middle-class woman was also expected to remain in the family home, and there were still few respectable housing options if she chose to live alone.

Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei have argued that the numbers of middle-class women working and living away from home increased in the interwar period because there was a strong ‘desire of the daughters of the house to cast off their role as angels of the house and revolt against the oppressiveness and totality of those large upper-middle-class houses and families firmly under patriarchal thumb’ and this was achieved by moving out of the family home.<sup>243</sup>

This section will explore an alternative room of one’s own, the shared house or flat, which was typically the preferred choice over the boarding house or bed-sitting room for the more affluent middle-class woman. The representation of this living space in literature provides an interesting contrast to that of the boarding house, for despite the

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<sup>241</sup> Strachey, ‘Changes in Employment’, p. 121.

<sup>242</sup> Graves and Hodge, p. 45.

<sup>243</sup> Briganti and Mezei, p. 11.

greater freedom and lack of rules from a landlady or parent, the same societal discourses of transience surround what was essentially still considered a temporary living space for the lifestage between childhood and marriage. It also serves to draw attention to the aspects that make the boarding house distinct in class terms.

### **Rites of Passage**

In Elizabeth Bowen's novel *To the North* (1932), Cecilia Summers and her sister-in-law Emmeline Summers are living together in a house in St John's Wood. 'Comparatively inexpensive houses' could still be found in St John's Wood in the 1930s, although they were rapidly becoming flats, and 'the convenience of its proximity to London, combined with the purity of the air, made this an area chosen and inhabited by artists, authors, philosophers and scientists as well as by more prosaic members of the middle classes'.<sup>244</sup>

Cecilia is a widow, her husband Henry was killed in a tragic accident after only a year of marriage, and her only remaining relative, her mother, is in America. Emmeline is Henry's sister, an orphan who has never been married. Because Cecilia and Emmeline have no immediate family with whom they can live the decision to share seems a practical one, rather than an act of rebellion. Lady Waters, Cecilia's aunt by marriage and Emmeline's distant cousin, disapproves highly of their living arrangement: 'Women could not live together, sisters-in-law especially'.<sup>245</sup> Bowen positions the two women as counterpoints to each other: Emmeline is independent and absorbed by her work as the co-founder of a travel agency business; Cecilia is a capricious lady of leisure. Due to their youth (both are under thirty years old) it is assumed that Emmeline will marry, and that Cecilia will remarry, and so their living arrangement is perceived as only temporary; but while Cecilia seeks stability in a loveless second marriage with Julian Tower,

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<sup>244</sup> Christopher Hibbert and others, *The London Encyclopaedia*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan, 2008), p. 777.

<sup>245</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *To the North* (1932; repr. London: Penguin, 1960), p.13. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with TTN.

Emmeline embarks on a destructive love affair with Mark Linkwater that leads ultimately to her death.

Commentators often mention the motif of movement and transportation in this novel: from the train journey that opens the novel to the motor car accident that ends it, ‘Everything is moving, everything is going’ and ‘the characters are “driven” in every sense’.<sup>246</sup> Lady Waters remarks that Cecilia ‘never seems to be happy when she is not in a train – unless, of course, she is motoring’ (TTN 15). Flying, however, would not be a satisfactory alternative: ‘She would arrive too quickly’ (TTN 15). In *To the North* it is the journey that is the objective; even the novel’s title suggests a movement towards something rather than a final arrival *in* the north. For Emmeline and Cecilia their ‘anxiety to be elsewhere’ (TN 64) is without a destination, forcing them to continue moving, for when they are in motion they are suspended from having to decide on their future.

*To the North* emphasises the fragmentary and ephemeral nature of modern life. In her collected writings, *Pictures and Conversations*, Bowen comments that: ‘speed is exciting to have grown up with [...] it accentuates the absoluteness of stillness. Permanence, where it occurs, and it does occur, stands out the more strongly in an otherwise ephemeral world’.<sup>247</sup> David Harvey has described the combination of speed and increasing mobility as ‘time-space compression’; a condition of modernity in capitalist societies that causes a speeding up ‘in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world sometimes seems to collapse inwards upon us’.<sup>248</sup> In Bowen’s text, this time-space compression results in a sense of impending doom, and the unease pervading the novel reflects the characters’ anxiety that as things speed up their fragile worlds will collapse upon them.

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<sup>246</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), p. 25; Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p.96.

<sup>247</sup> Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* (London: Allen Lane, 1975), p. 44.

<sup>248</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 240

Even when they are not physically moving from place to place, Cecilia and Emmeline embody a restless anxiety that Bowen constantly reinforces through reference to the lack of stability of their living arrangements. From the opening at a Milan railway station where ‘Uncertain thoughts of home filled the station restaurant’ (TTN 5), home is a place shrouded in uncertainty and anxiety. Bowen makes the house in St John’s Wood seem a pit stop on two very separate journeys. While from the outside they may appear to embrace the mobility of the independent woman, there is an acute awareness that they must eventually move out of their current living situation. Cecilia’s married female friends ‘all advised Cecilia to marry again’ (TTN 30) and Lady Waters declares, ‘I do wish she would settle down’ (TTN 170). Their lives seem an anxious wait for the inevitable marriage of their companion, although for Emmeline this seems increasingly unlikely: ‘Nobody wants to marry me’ (TTN 196). For both women marriage is seen as the final destination that will bring their movement to a halt, like the ending of the nineteenth-century novel.

The shared house of Cecilia and Emmeline can be read as a threshold space before marriage. Discussing his concept of the threshold, Benjamin points out that the threshold is not only a boundary between two spaces, transition and transformation are what define the threshold:

Threshold and boundary must be very carefully distinguished. The *Schwelle* <threshold> is a *zone*. And indeed a zone of transition. Transformation, passage, flight’.<sup>249</sup>

Benjamin expands on this notion of transition, referring to rites of passage such as birth, marriage and puberty: ‘In modern life,’ he states ‘these transitions are becoming ever more unrecognizable and impossible to experience. We have grown very poor in threshold experiences’.<sup>250</sup> Taken from the Latin word for threshold, liminality is a term

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<sup>249</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, ‘First Sketches’, M°, 26, p. 856.

<sup>250</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, ‘Convolute O: Prostitution, Gambling’, O2a, 1, p. 494.

used by cultural anthropologists to describe a transitional or indeterminate state between socially and culturally defined stages of a person's life, often linked to rituals or rites of passage. It is in these transitional stages that transformation occurs, making threshold zones key sites for identity formation.

In *Rites of Passage*, first published in French in 1908, the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep identified events, such as birth and marriage, as 'liminal rites' or 'rites of transition'.<sup>251</sup> Like Benjamin's arcades (in German, *passagen*), that become a metaphor for the transition of society from old to new, a rite of passage requires going through a threshold space, a passageway, to transition to another lifestage. In the threshold space 'subjects pass through a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo'.<sup>252</sup> The individual moves out of the threshold space in the phase Van Gennep identifies as incorporation, when the transitioned self is incorporated into their new environment and returns to a stable, defined position in society.

For many women in the interwar period the traditional threshold experiences, the rites of passage from the role of daughter to wife and mother, were not to be. Despite their perpetual movement both Cecilia and Emmeline want to pass through this threshold space and have an underlying desire for stability. Emmeline expresses her need for permanence:

She longed suddenly to be fixed, to enjoy an apparent stillness, to watch even an hour complete round one object its little changes of light, to see out the little and greater cycles of day and season in one place, beloved, familiar (TTN 144).

The desire for 'one place, beloved, familiar', is a need for a fixed location in which she can feel at home, as Emmeline explains to Julian:

All the same, I should like to live *somewhere*; it would feel more natural. If you were to marry, Julian, your wife would locate you: somewhere would become special, you'd know where you were. But no one could do that for me, and no one seems to expect me to do it for them (TTN 192).

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<sup>251</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 11.

<sup>252</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 24.

By saying she would like to 'live somewhere' Bowen is emphasising Emmeline's feeling that she does not currently live anywhere that can be defined as a permanent home. Emmeline's comment that Julian would be located by having a wife suggests that it is only through marriage that a person can make the transition to stability. As Van Gennep has argued, identity is not stabilised until the individual moves into the next stage of their life. Emmeline's assumption is that this can only be achieved by marriage, a prospect that for her is unlikely, thus seeming to preclude any future possibility of being located. Emmeline must continue to exist in the threshold zone unable to transition to a permanent or fixed identity.

The creation of a stable home is a form of class consolidation as well as identity formation. In the transitional stage of the threshold, without a male head of household to define their social class, Cecilia and Emmeline temporarily maintain the class status of their dead former husband and father, respectively. However, that status can only be stabilised upon their marriage.

Women were often assumed by commentators in the interwar period to have greater access to social mobility than men, albeit through marriage rather than occupational progression. For men, marriage was not viewed as an opportunity to improve their social class: marrying a woman of a higher social class would only serve to lower her status down to his own. At a 1937 conference on social stratification at King's College, London, one commentator agreed that women's social class was complicated by the 'probability of marriage and of retirement on marriage from business'. He suggested that because of this marriage was a form of occupational mobility: 'If wifedom may be regarded as an occupation, and surely it is the most important and populous of all

occupations, then here is occupational mobility outranking all others'.<sup>253</sup> This comment points to the fact that marriage was still perceived as a woman's primary occupation, despite the declining opportunities for marriage in the interwar years.

Whether women could move very far up the class hierarchy by marriage alone was questionable. In a survey of social mobility sponsored by the Ministry of Labour and undertaken by the Government Social Survey department in 1949, an analysis was made of a representative sample of British marriages divided by those before the Great War, those during the interwar period, and those later than 1940. Overall, the survey found a 'slight tendency for men to marry women of a lower social origin than their own'. The least social mobility was found among marriages between those of the upper classes and those who have had university or other higher education.<sup>254</sup> Marrying outside of one's social class was still frowned upon, particularly among the upper-middle and upper classes: 'there are few things that are so *de-grading* as the inappropriate marriage. It is a much more serious matter if a youth marries out of his class than if he marries a woman of a different nationality or of a different religion'.<sup>255</sup> This suggests that there were only limited movements that could be made within the social class hierarchy. Generally a woman would transition from the class status of her father, to that of her husband without a significant 'rags to riches' leap.

### **A Stable Dwelling Place**

If one does not feel located one enters what Edward S. Casey has referred to as 'place-panic', the feeling of placelessness that causes deep anxiety and 'a sense of unbearable

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<sup>253</sup> John Hilton, 'Problem of Bridges and Barriers' in *Class Conflict and Social Stratification: Being a Report of a Conference held under the auspices of the Institute of Sociology at King's College of Household and Social Science, London, from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> September, 1937* ed. by T. H. Marshall, (London: Le Play House Press, 1938) pp. 63-72 (p.67).

<sup>254</sup> Jerzy Berent, 'Social Mobility and Marriage: A Study of Trends in England and Wales', in *Social Mobility in Britain*, ed. by D. V. Glass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), pp. 321-338 (pp. 335, 337).

<sup>255</sup> C. A. Mace, 'Beliefs and Attitudes in Class Relations', in *Class Conflict and Social Stratification*, p. 159.

emptiness'.<sup>256</sup> Placelessness is the inability to locate or orientate oneself. One does not have to be without an actual house to feel this sense of dislocation, being unsettled within the home, particularly if it is only temporary, can cause this 'place-panic'. In an example of the link between the interior space of the home and the interiority of the mind, the announcement of Cecilia's engagement causes the image of the shared house to collapse in Emmeline's mind:

Timber by timber, Oudenarde Road fell to bits, as small houses are broken up daily to widen the roar of London. She saw the door open on emptiness: blanched walls as though after a fire. Houses shared with women are built on sand. She thought: My home, my home (TTN 207-8).

Emmeline enters place-panic as she sees the house literally demolished piece by piece in her mind's eye, leaving her without a place in the world and without a location to piece together her fragmented sense of self. Heidegger refers to the 'homelessness of contemporary man' as an existential anxiety experienced by all humans of the nothingness of death, the 'oblivion of Being'.<sup>257</sup> Bowen's 'door open on emptiness' suggests just such an entry to oblivion and nothingness. Despite not having felt at home within the house, as it disappears Emmeline calls it 'my home'; mourning not only for a lost house, but a lost image of a home that never was and never could be.

A shared house was perceived as being a more stable home than the boarding house. Many women who remained unmarried in the thirties found long-term companionship in living with another woman, and these relationships will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. However, in Bowen's novel, neither Cecilia nor Emmeline are prepared to accept their living arrangement for the long-term, and Bowen emphasises how this reinforces the precarious nature of their household. Cecilia and Emmeline inhabit the same house, but neither 'dwell' there in a Heideggerian sense. This

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<sup>256</sup> Edward S. Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. ix-x.

<sup>257</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 164-5.

relationship between the existence of the self and dwelling is one that is notably absent in the character of Emmeline, whom Bowen constantly refers to as not being there: both in the sense of not being located and in not physically existing.

Towards the end of Bowen's novel, Emmeline arrives at the startling realisation that her estrangement from the house is due to the fact it is so heavily personalised by Cecilia that it contains only Cecilia: 'This house is Cecilia: when I come in I see her, simply, whether she's in or out. Nothing feels part of me, yet I live here too. I feel I leave nothing but steam in the bath' (TTN 192). The transient nature of steam, that it will drift and disappear, that it leaves nothing behind to indicate it was ever there, reflects Emmeline's lack of connection with her surroundings. If '[t]o dwell means to leave traces', as Benjamin observed, then Emmeline is unable to dwell because she leaves no trace.<sup>258</sup> Indeed, although Cecilia shares a living space she does not feel that she *lives* with anyone:

Saying: "I live with Emmeline," she might paint for ignorant eyes, and even dazzle herself for a moment with a tempting picture of intimacy. But she lent herself to a fiction in which she did not believe; for she lived with nobody (TTN 133).

In this passage Cecilia is not simply referring to the fact that she perceives the house to be more hers than Emmeline's, or even to a lack of intimacy with Emmeline, but the awareness that Emmeline has never really been mentally dwelling in the house.

The rooms are full of Cecilia's things and Emmeline's absence. In the novel the room that is described in the most detail is the shared drawing-room, and it is observed through the eyes of Cecilia who notes the marble mantelpiece with its 'whole array of dear objects, sentimental and brittle. If elsewhere the room in its studied restraint might seem cold or formal [...] the mantelpiece broke out into a gala of femininity' (TTN 20). The only other room that is mentioned is Emmeline's bedroom when she is not there,

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<sup>258</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 'Exposé of 1935', p. 9.

again through Cecilia's eyes: 'with counterpane drawn up over the pillow, looked shrouded, as though no one slept here now' (TTN 133). Through this device Bowen situates Cecilia's presence in the house over that of Emmeline.

Unable to dwell within the house or at work, Emmeline leaves to restlessly pace the Bloomsbury streets near her office. Her street walking enacts a literal homelessness. 'Walking about, walking about, is one of the greatest tragedies in London' wrote Mrs Cecil Chestertown, founder of the Cecil House hostels for women, in 1936. A woman staying in the Cecil House who had been walking all day stated: 'it's the walking about – the walking about. I've been looking and looking for a job and I'm worn out. I have just got the money for my bed to-night, but to-morrow I shall have to start again'.<sup>259</sup> The endless cycle of 'walking about' is futile in Emmeline's case, for what she seeks is not something as straightforward as money or a bed, but simply to feel settled. If, as Heidegger argues, 'spaces receive their being from locations' (BDT 154), then in order for individuals to situate themselves within the world they must locate themselves in place.

To return to Ken Worpole's three principal settings of the London novel discussed in the introduction, the street, the rooming-house, and the bourgeois interior, it seems that often in the novel of alternative interior spaces the street overlaps. This can be seen in Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, where Miriam embraces the fluidity between interior and exterior space: walking down Tottenham Court Road, just before midnight, she realises that the street 'had become part of her home' (II 29). In contrast to Emmeline, Miriam finds freedom in the city streets and does not associate them with the possibilities of homelessness.

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<sup>259</sup> Mrs Cecil Chesterton, "...The Walking About...The Walking About...", in *Cecil Houses Women's Public Lodging House Fund 1935-36*, 8<sup>th</sup> Report, December 1936, pp. 16-21 (p. 18).

*To the North* serves to highlight the central class differences between women in temporary accommodation. Although the affluent middle-class woman as represented by characters like Cecilia and Emmeline may still feel constrained by societal conventions regarding their lifestyle, they do nonetheless have a large element of control over their situations and their living arrangements are of choice rather than necessity. For Emmeline the prospect of homelessness is clearly only symbolic, but for many women without family support it became a very real prospect, as demonstrated in Jameson's novella *A Day Off* discussed in the last chapter where the unnamed woman has 'less than ten shillings between her and – nothing' (ADO 35). While the flat or shared house was an option for the affluent middle-class woman, the boarding house became the refuge for the older middle-class woman with limited finances. This woman was the 'shabby genteel', the type of boarder Gibbons's character Miss Padsoe would have become if she had not become a boarding house proprietor. Charles Dickens provides a character sketch of 'Shabby-Genteel People' in *Sketches by Boz*, in which he describes men who are suffering a decline in fortunes but who attempt to keep up a respectable appearance. When Dickens wrote the sketch (published in 1836) he stated that 'only men are shabby-genteel; a woman is always either dirty and slovenly in the extreme, or neat and respectable', but as the many representations of governesses in Victorian fiction demonstrate, poorly paid single women or those with only limited financial resources, were also struggling to maintain the neat and respectable appearance of their class with very little money.<sup>260</sup>

A fictional example can be found in Ellen Burgess's short story 'Indecision' published in the *English Review* in September 1930, the protagonist Miss Evans must loiter in warm shops where she cannot afford to buy the goods:

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<sup>260</sup> Charles Dickens, *Sketches by Boz* (1836; repr. London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p. 304.

She had come out because it was cold and comfortless in her lodging, and she could not afford the shillings which her gas meter swallowed with the rapacity of an ogre.<sup>261</sup>

Miss Evans is described as of ‘uncertain age and uncertain mind’ (IN 387), and the title of the story refers to her inability to make decisions in her life, while also pointing to the fact that without money Miss Evans actually has very little choice. Burgess demonstrates this when Miss Evans studies the menu in the department store restaurant ‘at length’ despite only being able to afford coffee and a roll. Miss Evans’s expression of relief that she does not have to make a decision: ‘Thank goodness that needed no debate!’ (IN 390), can be read as a thinly disguised attempt at deluding herself that even if she had the money she would be unable to decide.

Miss Evans considers leaving London where ‘with the exception of her landlady, who was a grim and common woman, she did not know a soul’ (IN 389). In this Burgess alludes to Miss Evans’s declining social status:

She wondered for the hundredth time if it would be wiser to leave London, to go to some seaside resort; but, then, she was so shabby, London was the best place for “shabby genteels” no one took any notice of them’ (IN 389).

Being a ‘shabby genteel’ who has ‘outlived one’s family’ (IN 391) places Miss Evans in a difficult situation in terms of employment: ‘If I were of a different class, I would gladly go out charing, but my parents would not have approved, and one must not lower one’s caste’ (IN 389). Miss Evans is excluded from the lower-class jobs because of her class, but she is also excluded from more respectable forms of employment because she is ‘unskilled’ and ‘too shabby’ (IN 391). For Miss Evans her ending is an abrupt one, walking out in front of an omnibus she regains consciousness in hospital where she is told she is dying and she happily closes her eyes thinking, ‘Anyhow, it will be a change’ (IN

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<sup>261</sup> Ellen Burgess, ‘Indecision’, *English Review*, 51 (September 1930), 387-92 (p. 387). Subsequent references to this story will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with IN.

392). Burgess implies that even death will be more interesting than her character's current life.

The class of the 'shabby genteel' are the older women who move into boarding houses because there is nowhere left for them to go, and with limited funds they often tread precariously close to homelessness. The concept of homelessness can be seen as an ambiguous category. Referring to the situation in the United States during the Depression Elaine S. Abelson has observed that the situation that 'many observers in the 1930s saw as homelessness – single women living alone in furnished rooms – would not be labeled as homeless today'.<sup>262</sup> What is clear, however, is that even for women of the middle-classes, without a husband or a father in the household the living situation was defined as temporary. This could create feelings of symbolic homelessness for the affluent, as well as very real anxieties about ending up on the streets for those of limited economic means.

## 2.5 Hotel Habits

To conclude, this chapter will focus on the homelessness inherent in temporary dwelling places by looking at the space of the hotel, the most transient form of accommodation. Living in a hotel implies the lack of a home more than living in a boarding house because there is not even the illusion of permanence; a hotel is intended only for a stay of a few days and never as a home. Hotels were categorised by class, and living in a cheap hotel for longer than a short-term holiday was not perceived as a respectable form of accommodation for women.

Sixteen-year-old Portia Quayne, the heroine of Bowen's 1938 novel *The Death of the Heart*, has spent her life living in the transient spaces of hotels and boarding houses. Following her parents' death, Portia is sent to London to stay with her wealthy half-

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<sup>262</sup> Elaine S. Abelson, 'The Times That Tried Only Men's Souls: Women, Work, and Public Policy in the Great Depression' in *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, ed. by Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans (Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), pp. 219-38 (p. 222).

brother Thomas and his wife Anna. Portia is the result of an adulterous affair by Thomas's father, and Thomas and Anna are reluctant guardians who make it clear to Portia she is an unwelcome addition to their lives: 'left to us in a will – or in a dying request, which is not legal, and so worse'.<sup>263</sup> When Thomas and Anna go on holiday together, Portia is dispatched to the seaside town of Waikiki to board with Anna's old governess Mrs Heccomb. The Quaynes live self-absorbed lives with a small cohort of regular visitors, one of whom Portia falls in love with. Eddie, who works at Thomas's law firm, is a character strikingly similar to Markie in *To the North*, unsuitable and unstable. The novel charts Portia's loss of innocence and ultimate rejection and betrayal, first by Anna who reads her diary and then by Eddie. The novel ends with Portia running away to Major Blunt, who leads a friendless existence in hotels, thus bringing Portia's unsettled life full circle to the transient world of her childhood. In the final scene the Quaynes' family servant, and Portia's only friend, Matchett enters the hotel with the intention of bringing Portia back to the Quaynes' London home.

Like Emmeline and Cecilia in *To the North*, Portia is a character defined by movement, but while they generated their own momentum, Portia is moved by others who shift her around their own lives. As Massey has pointed out in relation to the flows and movement necessarily for social mobility, 'some initiate flows and movement, others don't; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it'.<sup>264</sup> Portia is powerless to initiate movement. In her early life her transfer from hotel to hotel was controlled by her mother; her father's will passes her on to the Quaynes, who in turn send her to Mrs Heccomb and back again. Even the arrangement stipulated by Mr Quayne in his will was only intended to be for one year; after that it was assumed that either Anna and Thomas would keep Portia 'or else,

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<sup>263</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (1938; repr. London: Vintage, 1998), p. 13. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with DH.

<sup>264</sup> Massey, 'Power-geometry', p. 61.

perhaps, that she'd marry [...] If neither should happen, she is to go on to some aunt, Irene's sister, abroad' (DH 15). Her future is dependent on her marrying or being passed on, yet again, to another unwilling family member. Portia is defined as an unwanted burden, effectively 'imprisoned' by the mobility chosen by others, unable to settle anywhere permanently.

Bowen highlights the insecure habits that have been ingrained in Portia by her unsettled hotel life in a pivotal scene at Miss Paullie's. In order to solve the 'problem of Portia during the day', Anna sends her to Miss Paullie's who 'organized classes for girls – delicate girls, girls who did not do well at school, girls putting in time before they went abroad, girls who were not to go abroad at all' (DH 50). Portia is caught reading a letter from Eddie underneath the table during one of Miss Paullie's classes. However, although the letter is the first thing Miss Paullie notices, this is soon eclipsed by Portia's handbag, which is also on her lap:

What else is that you have on your knee? Your bag? Why did you not leave your bag in the cloakroom? Nobody will take it here, you know. Now, put your letter away in your bag again, and leave them both in the cloakroom. To carry your bag about with you indoors is a hotel habit, you know (DH 55).

Portia's actions determine her social class to Miss Paullie, who makes it clear that a 'hotel habit' is an example of lower-class behaviour. For Portia, carrying her bag around is a form of security; it reflects her sense of homelessness and the need to be prepared to move on at any moment. Identifying Portia's social class is difficult; her father was a member of the upper middle class, but as a child born out of marriage, although Portia was able to take his name, she is unable to take his class. Living with Anna and Thomas should define her by Thomas's class, but again, she is treated as an outsider, a temporary guest, rather than a member of the family.

Her class position is thus as unsettled as her living conditions and her transient lifestyle has served to render Portia's social class opaque. Miss Paullie believes that

Portia's lower class is inscribed by her behaviour: '*Sins* cut boldly up through every class in society, but mere misdemeanours show a certain level in life' (DH 56). Bowen deliberately highlights Miss Paullie's conception of class behaviour in this statement, for it implies that 'misdemeanours' are behaviours that class conditioning should have erased. Thus, although one can choose to sin, these 'mere misdemeanours' are what gives away one's social class and enable Portia to be "'placed" in an instant'.<sup>265</sup> Portia has learnt none of the class signifiers of the wealthy inhabitants of large houses, and her situation does not elicit any sympathy from Miss Paullie who 'was sorry about Portia, and sorry for Anna' (DH 56). Miss Paullie is not sorry 'for' Portia, but 'about' her, demonstrating that she also considers Portia a burden on Anna.

For the landlady who opens up her home as a boarding house, the space always retains the stability of home; this is a very different situation for the boarders living with her, for whom there is no sense of permanence. When they pass a row of houses and Portia asks who lives there, Mrs Heccomb responds, 'No one, dear; those are only lodging houses' (DH 133), making a clear spatial division between houses that are homes and those that are not, and implying that nobody could possibly 'live' in a lodging house.

This perception, that hotels and lodging houses fall outside normal living spaces, is what makes them an example of Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, which, in a literal translation from the Latin, means 'place of otherness'. In his essay 'Of Other Spaces', based on a lecture given in March 1967, Foucault outlines how spaces in which we live are determined by 'a set of relations that delineates sites'; heterotopia are 'counter-sites' in which 'all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.<sup>266</sup> If the family home is the clearly delineated site, the hotel or boarding house is constituted by its difference to that site, it is

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<sup>265</sup> Orwell, *The English People*, p. 10.

<sup>266</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16 (1986), 22-27 (pp. 23, 24). Subsequent references to this essay will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with OOS.

the ‘counter-site’ of home. The heterotopia is established through its difference to other sites and, Kevin Hetherington has argued, it is defined by its alternative organising principles: ‘Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them’. The hotel inverts the organisation of the family home and Portia’s hotel habits, such as carrying her bag around with her, are indicative of the way the ‘alternate ordering marks them out as Other’; in this case it is not only the space that is marked as Other, but the inhabitants of that space.<sup>267</sup> It is Portia’s behaviour, not only within the space of the hotel, but in her life after the hotel, that mark out the site of the heterotopia:

It is the heterogeneous combination of the materiality, social practices and events that were located at this site and what they came to represent in contrast to other sites, that allow us to call it a heterotopia.<sup>268</sup>

Portia has developed other hotel habits, behaviours that contrast the expected social order of the settled life of the family home with the transient dwelling space of the hotel, she ‘instinctively spoke low after dark: she was accustomed to thin walls’ (DH 73). Portia’s habits are those of someone who knows nothing of permanence; she is careless with personal property because she has never really owned anything, it has always been someone else’s. Anna cannot understand this:

She is so unnaturally callous about *objects* – she treats any hat, for instance, like an old envelope. Nothing that’s hers ever seems [...] to belong to her: which makes it meaningless to give her any present, unless it’s something to eat, and she doesn’t always like that. It may be because they always lived in hotels (DH 9)

What Anna’s character perceives as ‘callous’ can be interpreted as Portia’s fear of becoming too attached to anything. In a hotel, things and people are only fleeting and never fixtures: ‘They look as though they’d always be there, and then the next moment you’ve no idea where they’ve gone, and they’ve gone for ever’ (DH 48). Anna also cannot understand the mess that Portia leaves in her room. Portia has never had a room of her own, and the freedom she now has to leave things in disorder can be interpreted as

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<sup>267</sup> Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. viii.

<sup>268</sup> Hetherington, p. 8.

liberating. She is very particular about people handling her things and makes precise arrangements with her toy bears. Iris Marion Young has argued that home is not only the things within a room, ‘but their arrangement in space in a way that supports the body habits and routines of those who dwell there’.<sup>269</sup> Portia is used to having to move about frequently, so her arrangements of objects would have to be packed up again almost at once. By leaving her things lying around she is providing a pathway for return.

Constant change has become a habit for Portia, but she is attempting to cling to an idea of permanence at Thomas and Anna’s house, even though she knows this will also only be temporary. Portia’s mess becomes a form of ownership, and a way of inscribing a ‘living’ space, as Didier Maleuvre has perceptively commented ‘Domestic tidiness is after all the bourgeois ideal which dictates that the interior should remain always as it is, as though no one lived there.’<sup>270</sup> By leaving a mess, Portia is inscribing herself upon the room. Bowen focuses Anna’s account of Portia’s messy room around a single object, the desk ‘a little *escritoire* thing’ (DH 9), which particularly irks Anna:

She had crammed it, but really, stuffed it, as though it were a bin. She seems to like hoarding paper; she gets almost no letters, but she’d been keeping all sorts of things Thomas and I throw away – begging letters, for instance (DH 9).

Without friends to write to her, it seems at first that Portia has appropriated the junk mail and circulars as personal messages. Maleuvre has argued that in the nineteenth-century it was through ownership that the bourgeois individual inhabited the home: ‘To dwell is to possess [...] Collecting is a way of taking possession of the world’.<sup>271</sup> Portia possesses nothing, so she surrounds herself with the objects she has access to: unwanted circulars and papers. This could be a method of taking possession of the room, of inscribing her home through ownership. However, the sheer quantity of papers and her treatment of

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<sup>269</sup> Iris Marion Young, ‘House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme’ in *Gender Struggles: Practical Approaches to Contemporary Feminism*, ed. by Constance L. Mui and Julien S. Murphy (Lanham, MD and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), pp. 314-46 (p. 330).

<sup>270</sup> Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 144.

<sup>271</sup> Maleuvre, p. 115.

them, ‘as though it were a bin’, indicates that her ‘hoarding paper’ is more than a suggestion of home, but almost a collection in preparation for a nest, a way of making a physical home from unwanted letters and the things that other people throw away. Maud Ellmann has suggested that Portia is like ‘a begging letter, an unsolicited circular that the Quaynes would prefer to disregard’.<sup>272</sup> Indeed, Anna’s anger at Portia’s mess seems only a displacement of her anger towards Portia’s very existence: ‘She’s made nothing but trouble since before she was born’ (DH 10).

Anna has provided Portia with a desk with a locked drawer, expecting Portia to want to protect her possessions and lock things away, ‘I hoped that would make her see that I quite meant her to have a life of her own’ (DH 9). However, not only has Portia lost the key, but Anna disregards her original notion of Portia having ‘a life of her own’ by going through her desk and reading her diary. Anna excuses her behaviour to St Quentin by saying she was only going to empty the desk in order to ‘tell her she must be tidy’ (DH 9), but became distracted by the diary. In his book on the idea of mess, *Cooking with Mud*, David Trotter cites Donald Winnicott’s theory of the transitional object, usually a piece of fabric, that becomes the child’s first possession, separate from themselves, which they can control. These objects tend to be messy:

Indeed, the object’s messiness – a guarantee, in effect, that the parent will not interfere – *is* its meaning and value, or as much of a meaning and value as it will ever acquire. The messes we continue to make in adolescence and (rather more sheepishly) in adult life are like transitional objects in that their meaning and value depends on other people’s agreement not to clear them away.<sup>273</sup>

Anna, however, interferes with Portia’s mess; although she does not clear it away she disrupts it, taking it out of the desk and then attempting to ‘put everything back the way it was’ (DH 10). For Portia, things can never be back the way they were, her attempts at homemaking have been disrupted and her trust has been betrayed. The overall effect is to

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<sup>272</sup> Ellmann, p. 137.

<sup>273</sup> David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.5-6.

make her feel more unwelcome, demonstrating that her room is not her own, just like in a hotel, and accentuating her feelings of homelessness.

A heterotopia, although it can be seen as an in-between space, is not a threshold in the sense that there is no transition, instead they are ‘space[s] of deferral’, where life can only be postponed or put on hold.<sup>274</sup> Like Emmeline in *To the North*, Portia seeks stability in a life over which she has no control. The only source of stability for Portia is the Quaynes’ servant, Matchett, who has always been there, passed down through the family and inherited by each generation. Matchett was ‘not a matter of choice’ and had literally come ‘with the furniture that has always been her charge’ (DH 23).

Portia attempts to create a place for herself by anchoring herself in her diary. She writes herself into the written page, a place initially of stability, but which is destabilised by the readers of her diary, Anna and Eddie. The diary, initially a place of refuge, becomes an unsafe place open to the interpretations of the readers and another place outside of Portia’s power.

Portia needs to take control of her movement in order to achieve any sense of agency, however, her only independent actions result in failure: her relationship with Eddie and her escape to Major Blunt’s hotel. Bowen deliberately accentuates the similarities between Major Blunt and Portia, who are both effectively homeless and friendless, to show how Portia identifies with Major Blunt’s hotel life and seeks refuge with the only person she feels may understand her: ‘you and I are the same’ (DH 290). Portia propositions Major Blunt in his ‘temporary little stale room’ (DH 293), offering to marry him so the two of them could create a home together: ‘we could have a home; we would not have to live in a hotel’ (DH 295). For Major Blunt, the Quaynes’ house represents the comfort of home and he is unaware that he is unwelcome and that Anna thought him ‘quite pathetic’ (DH 288). After Portia breaks this news to Major Blunt,

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<sup>274</sup> Hetherington, p. ix.

Bowen has him envisage a similar image of destruction to the Quaynes' house as Emmeline experiences in *To the North*: 'His home had come down; he must no longer envisage Windsor Terrace, or go there again' (DH 298).

Bowen leaves Portia's final outcome unknown. Although the impossibility of her staying at the hotel with Major Blunt suggests that Matchett will return her once more to the Quaynes' home, there is no indication if that is to be anything other than another temporary respite.

Portia has become trapped by her transient accommodation: not only is she caught in a perpetual cycle of movement, but her instability has become the defining feature of her social class, through the behaviours and 'hotel habits' that have been inscribed upon her. Paula E. Geyh has argued that, 'subjectivity and space are mutually constructing: while subjects constitute themselves through the creation of spaces, these same spaces also elicit and structure subjectivities'.<sup>275</sup> A stable location was not only considered necessary for class consolidation, but also for the formation of a secure social and cultural identity. For the single woman, whose class status was often perceived as uncertain without a male head of household to define and place her, any move towards economic and social agency, both as a landlady and a boarder, is achieved only through the forfeiting of her class privilege. Intended as only temporary forms of accommodation, these threshold dwelling spaces between the childhood home and marriage became a heterotopia. Constituted as 'other' in relation to the family home, they created an ambiguity in terms of a woman's class and 'place' in the world, which could only be re-established through marriage or a return to the family home.

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<sup>275</sup> Paula E. Geyh, 'Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*', *Contemporary Literature*, 34 (1993), 103-22 (p. 104).

**Chapter 3**  
**'Sexuality was in the Air': Relationships in the Boarding House**

"I say, Dulcie. You do know a lot about 'things,' don't you? You know what I mean – all about sex and everything". Dulcie looked on the pavement ahead of her. Then: "Well, you know, you can't live in a boarding house for a long time without getting to know a good lot. After all, I am twenty-one".

Margery Maitland Davidson, *Full Board*<sup>276</sup>

From Friedrich Engels description in 1845 of common lodging houses as 'hot-beds of unnatural vice', to popular fictional representations of the 'bawdy house', the communal aspects of boarding house living have long been associated with sexual impropriety.<sup>277</sup>

Writing in 1935, the author of *Hotel and Boarding House Management* stated that 'boarding houses and small hotels exist to a great degree under moral suspicion in the public mind. They are viewed as places of bad repute'.<sup>278</sup>

Rob Shields has argued that 'Sites are never simply locations', he coined the term 'place-myth' in order to understand how places 'are actualised and endowed with meaning'. A place-myth is constructed from a series of place-images that produce a particular version of reality, that make it 'a particular *kind* of place, peopled by individuals acting in a specific manner and engaging in predictable routines'.<sup>279</sup> The image of the boarding house as a sexualised space can perhaps be understood by reflecting on the more recent shift in urban theory towards an eroticisation of the city. In his recent essay 'Citysex', Henning Bech has described the city as 'invariably and ubiquitously, inherently and inevitably and thoroughly sexualized'.<sup>280</sup> This sexualisation results from the eroticisation of the characteristics of modern life, such as the opportunities for freedom, anonymity, and voyeurism. The anonymity of urban relations

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<sup>276</sup> Margery Maitland Davidson, *Full Board* (London: Duckworth, 1932), pp. 35-6.

<sup>277</sup> Engels, p. 78; Bradshaw, p. 27.

<sup>278</sup> S. W. W., p. 124.

<sup>279</sup> Shields, pp. 6, 60.

<sup>280</sup> Henning Bech, 'Citysex: Representing Lust in Public', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 15 (1998), 215-41 (p. 215).

in the city gives individuals ‘freedom from “being oneself”’.<sup>281</sup> Similar characteristics can be applied to the space of the boarding house where individuals can be simultaneously anonymous, but also observed; the two-way voyeurism enacted by peering out of bedroom doorways to inspect and be inspected by visitors and other residents traversing landings and other communal spaces.

The image of the boarding house as a location for sexual transgressions has become part of urban mythology, making it the perfect fictional setting: ‘a dramatic site for intrigue and romance’.<sup>282</sup> In Margery Maitland Davidson’s 1932 novel, *Full Board*, quoted above, Dulcie lives with her aunt who runs a Bayswater boarding house. Davidson describes Dulcie’s situation in relation to the other boarders as ‘neither servant nor equal, but [she] held a unique position in the house because of her sympathy and discretion’. The boarders confide in Dulcie not only revelations of their own romantic liaisons, but also their suspicions about those taking place between their fellow boarders. Thus, the plot centres on Dulcie’s discovery and subsequent negotiation of the various covert romances taking place under her aunt’s roof. It also indicates that the view from the inside may be different to the externalised place-myth, despite the drama inside the house Davidson shows that Dulcie’s perception is very different. Dulcie is convinced that ‘the world outside the boarding house must decidedly contain adventure and romance somewhere’.<sup>283</sup>

This chapter will begin with a brief history of the spinster in order to situate the discussion of the literary and historical representations of sexuality within the boarding house. It will examine how the physical space determined the types of relationship available to women living alone in the nineteen thirties. The relationships examined include sexual arrangements with men where women take on the role of mistress or

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<sup>281</sup> Bech, p. 219.

<sup>282</sup> Briganti and Mezei, p.120.

<sup>283</sup> Davidson, pp. 9, 19.

amateur prostitute in return for economic support, as well as lesbian partnerships and non-sexual co-habitation as long-term female companions. The chapter concludes with an analysis of an unpublished autobiographical account from the Women's Library Archive, depicting one woman's experience of growing up in a boarding house in the thirties. This is read alongside James Joyce's short story 'The Boarding House'. Published in 1914, this early story demonstrates how the boarding house has long been viewed as a sexualised space. I consider the implications for the merging boundaries between the boarding house as sexualised space and the boarding house as family home. This provides an insight into the potential for sexual opportunity and encounter between the boarders, the landlady and her children.

### **3.1 The Unmarried Woman: Changing Perceptions of the Spinster**

The mid-nineteenth century to the nineteen thirties was a period in which conflicting discourses surrounded the unmarried woman. The *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of a 'spinster' as 'a woman still unmarried; especially one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid' has remained unchanged from the nineteenth century to the present day. However, perceptions of the spinster and her way of life have vacillated since the introduction of the term as the legal designation for the unmarried woman in the seventeenth century. Both positive and negative views have always existed, but the spinster has never received wide social acceptance. As the social scientist Lizzie Seal has pointed out, although spinsterhood was often a 'respectable identity' it has rarely been considered a 'normative one'.<sup>284</sup>

The rise of the 'respectable' spinster began with the discovery in the 1851 census that there was a surplus of approximately four hundred thousand single women in the

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<sup>284</sup> Lizzie Seal, 'Discourses of Single Women Accused of Murder: Mid Twentieth-Century Constructions of "Lesbians" and "Spinsters"', *Woman's Studies International Forum*, 32 (2009), 209-18 (p. 214).

population.<sup>285</sup> How this problem was to be addressed resulted in divided views in the press. On one side were those who favoured an attempt to rebalance the numbers through forced emigration. In an article entitled ‘Why Are Women Redundant?’ published in the *National Review* in April 1862, W. R. Greg suggested shipping half a million women to America and the colonies, arguing that sending them ‘from where they are redundant to where they are wanted’ would restore ‘that natural proportion between the sexes’.<sup>286</sup> On the other side of the debate were those who suggested that women be offered opportunities to have economically viable lives outside of marriage. Writing in response to Greg’s article, Frances Power Cobbe advocated that rather than promoting marriage, which would result in it becoming a ‘cold philosophic choice’, a woman should have the option of living a happy and fulfilled life without a husband; indeed single life should be made ‘so free and happy that they shall have not one temptation to change it’.<sup>287</sup>

The need to provide these women with useful occupation became the driving force behind the emergence of the first women’s movement in Britain that mobilised women to campaign for greater access to employment and education. Perceptions of the unmarried woman gradually shifted from viewing her as deprived and ‘surplus’, to a more powerful vision of her as an active instigator for social reform. However, the strength of this positive image was achieved by women accentuating their perceived differences from men and capitalising on activities, such as caring and teaching, which were considered to utilise feminine attributes. Women were effectively ‘trapped in a paradox’. Martha Vicinus has argued ‘the price of independence was the reinforcement of sexual

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<sup>285</sup> Judith Worsnop, ‘A Reevaluation of “The Problem of Surplus Women” in 19<sup>th</sup> Century England: The Case of the 1851 Census’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 13 (1990), 21-31 (p. 22).

<sup>286</sup> W. R. Greg, ‘Why Are Women Redundant?’, *National Review*, 28 (1862), 434-60, (pp. 444, 443).

<sup>287</sup> Frances Power Cobbe, *Essays on the Pursuits of Women: Reprinted from Fraser’s and Macmillan’s Magazines* (London: Emily Faithfull, 1863), pp. 63, 64.

stereotyping. Her personal ambition had to be hidden from herself and society under the cloak of self-sacrifice'.<sup>288</sup>

Indeed, this image was reflected in usage examples for the word 'spinster'. The 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* demonstrates the acceptable face of the mid-nineteenth-century unmarried woman with its emphasis on purity, chastity, and duty, citing *The Virginians* (1859) by William Makepeace Thackeray: 'your spotless spinster, your blank maiden just out of the school-room', and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Mount Royal* (1882): 'Providence is wonderfully kind to plain little spinsters with a knack of making themselves useful'. That this was not a position to which a woman should aspire was emphasised further by examples that cited the 'sorrows' and the 'full terrors of spinsterism'.<sup>289</sup>

The *fin de siècle* saw a growth in opportunities for women to pursue higher education and a range of occupations, and by the late nineteenth century the 'New Woman' was enjoying a life of increased freedom. This generation of independent women rejected the earlier model of spiritual self-sacrifice that had been adopted by the mid-nineteenth century spinsters and instead sought female independence on their own terms. Trudi Tate has described this life in relation to the writer Dorothy Richardson:

Women like Richardson moved to London to work in badly paid, dull, lower-middle-class jobs. Their reward was a particular kind of freedom: with less leisure time and less money they nonetheless attended lectures, read, engaged in politics and educated themselves. Usually unmarried, sometimes lesbian, financially independent through work – though often on the brink of poverty – these "New Women" lived in bedsitters and boarding houses and enjoyed a new kind of social freedom.<sup>290</sup>

Woolf depicts a similar independent and politically aware woman in her novel *Night and Day* (1919). Her character Mary Datchet works for the society for women's suffrage and

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<sup>288</sup> Vicinus, p. 16.

<sup>289</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary: A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Vol. X, ed. by Sir James A. H. Murray and others (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1933), p. 611.

<sup>290</sup> Trudi Tate, 'Introduction', in *Journey to Paradise: Short Stories and Autobiographical Sketches*, by Dorothy Richardson (London: Virago, 1989), pp. ix-xxxvi (p. xii).

lives in a single room off the Strand that is also used as a meeting place for those who wished ‘to discuss art, or to reform the State’.<sup>291</sup> Although their freedom may have often been overstated, these independent women were pivotal in creating new living spaces.

However, the New Woman was also ‘a creature of contradictions’, her freedom also represented to some commentators ‘cultural disintegration and social decline’.<sup>292</sup> The controversial representation of the New Woman emerged in a debate between feminist writer Sarah Grand and the novelist Ouida that appeared in *The North American Review* in 1894.<sup>293</sup> Grand’s article ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’, presented a positive image of the independent woman as an instrument for social change. The response by Maria Louise Ramé, writing under the pseudonym ‘Ouida’, adopted the derisory caricature of the unfeminine New Woman. Alongside Ouida’s misogynistic attack on the New Woman is a radical call for action to end cruelty to animals and exploitation of the poor. In her discussion of the Grand and Ouida debate, Talia Schaffer suggests that by deliberately setting herself outside the construction of the radical New Woman, Ouida’s own activism is effectively hidden: ‘Like a magnet, the New Woman draws all the shrapnel, so that other kinds of metal pass unnoticed’.<sup>294</sup> The attention these debates received in the press were part of the creation of the New Woman myth and, as Sally Ledger has argued, ‘unwittingly prised open a discursive space’ for the New Woman, which enabled more sympathetic views to co-exist alongside the negative representations.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Woolf, *Night and Day*, p. 44.

<sup>292</sup> Pykett, p. 17.

<sup>293</sup> See Sarah Grand, ‘The New Aspect of the Woman Question’, *The North American Review*, 158 (1894), 270-76; Ouida, ‘The New Woman’, *The North American Review*, 158 (1894), 610-19. Ouida’s article title was an abbreviation of Grand’s title and coined the name ‘New Woman’.

<sup>294</sup> Talia Schaffer, “‘Nothing But Foolscap and Ink’: Inventing the New Woman’ in *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact: Fin-de- Siècle Feminisms*, ed. by Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 39-52 (p. 46).

<sup>295</sup> Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 9.

By the late nineteenth century there was an affirmative shift in societal representations of the unmarried woman as spinsterhood had become increasingly normalised: 'No longer reclusive, useless, and embittered, the new spinster led an outgoing, productive life'.<sup>296</sup> The spinster can thus be seen to have attained a relatively strong position by the end of the nineteenth century as a positive embodiment of female independence.

The position of the unmarried woman underwent significant changes after the losses of the Great War. The deaths of three-quarters of a million young men drew attention once again to the 'problem' of the unmarried woman. Rather than being seen as a continuation of their unmarried nineteenth-century predecessors, the interwar generation of 'surplus women' were perceived to be a distinct group. The surplus women of the working classes had always been absorbed as servants or as factory workers. For the women of the middle classes their undertaking of wartime work had given them an active role in society and without either work or marriage prospects they became visibly 'surplus'.

Despite the number of single women of marriageable age outnumbering single men, the marriage rate rose in every age group after the war and by the nineteen thirties the 'institution of marriage was reaching its heyday'.<sup>297</sup> Writing in 1935, Irene Clephane described how there was a 'feverish search for mates' by women who were concerned that they would be left without a partner.<sup>298</sup> As marriages increased, perceptions of the unmarried women took on increasingly negative connotations. The financially independent image of the 'Bachelor Girl' able to afford a room of her own was no longer presented as the glamorous option; it was instead a 'pragmatic' choice, a temporary

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<sup>296</sup> Ruth Freeman and Patricia Klaus, 'Blessed or Not? The New Spinster in England and the United States in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 394-414 (p. 396).

<sup>297</sup> Pugh, p. viii.

<sup>298</sup> Irene Clephane, *Towards Sex Freedom* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1935), p. 203.

economic necessity in the transitional stage before marriage.<sup>299</sup> The post-war emphasis on women's return to the home was unequivocally to a heterosexual family home, not a single room, and the housing boom of the thirties consisted primarily of homes built to house the family. Although there were increasing numbers of unmarried women, the domestic ideal prevailed in the thirties when alternative role models such as 'flappers, career women, spinsters and lesbians were all portrayed as highly undesirable stereotypes, to be rejected at all costs'.<sup>300</sup> While the independent woman may have been an acceptable image for younger women, her lifestyle was viewed as only a transitional stage before marriage and there were no positive role models for the older, unmarried woman.

### **Women's Sexuality in the 1930s**

Reviewing Rosamond Lehmann's novel, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936), in *The Times Literary Supplement* on July 11 1936, Leonora Eyles concluded that: 'She has undoubtedly given a picture of contemporary life: probably the most disquieting thing about her book is its complete veracity'. This truthfulness extends to scenes to which readers may not be accustomed: 'Squeamish readers may shirk the visit to the abortionist, although here again Miss Lehmann's restraint spares us ugly physical details while exposing us to a horror of spiritual nakedness and despair'.<sup>301</sup> The power to shock in the abortion scene is not only the reference to an illegal event, but the appearance in print of an issue not usually subject to novelistic representation. Lehmann destabilises contemporary ideas of the subject matter that was deemed suitable for literary work and her novel both reflects and subverts the images of romantic love and marital harmony portrayed in women's magazines in the nineteen thirties: 'Well, it's all worked out like

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<sup>299</sup> Holden, p. 13.

<sup>300</sup> Deirdre Beddoe, *Back to Home and Duty: Women Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (London: Pandora, 1989), p. 9.

<sup>301</sup> Leonora Eyles, 'Book Review: Modern Lovers', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 July 1936, p. 579.

they tell you in *Woman's World*. A husband may stray, but home ties are strongest, and if you hang on he'll come back. It's the Other Woman who gets had for a mug'.<sup>302</sup>

Lehmann's work contributed to the growing body of novels by female writers whose depictions of women's everyday experiences demonstrated an alternative to the romantic novels that always ended in marriage. Clephane noted in her 1935 publication *Towards Sex Freedom*, that evidence of a profound change in attitudes towards sexual relations in the interwar period is indicated through the themes of popular literature: 'it is permissible nowadays for the writers of stories appearing in the twopenny fiction weeklies to send their hero and heroine away on a week-end together before marriage – a situation that would have been unthinkable to any writer of such fiction thirty years ago'.<sup>303</sup> Writing a survey of women writers in 1937, Margaret Lawrence attributed some of the changing morality to the shortage of male partners for traditional matrimony, which has 'produced in the writing of women interesting documents of irregular relationships between men and women'.<sup>304</sup> Although such a shift is unlikely to be due to one historical factor alone, the new prevalence of these themes in literature does reflect the view that relationships were changing and the type of relationship that could be depicted in literature was evolving.

Women fiction writers of the thirties who examined the everyday lives of women in alternative heterosexual relationships outside the boundaries of marriage, such as the mistress or the amateur prostitute, included Rosamond Lehmann and Jean Rhys. Both writers located these relationships in the single rooms of boarding houses and hotels, drawing on the place myth of these spaces, but also subverting it. These were very different narratives to the popular novels set in boarding houses; by revealing the

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<sup>302</sup> Rosamond Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936; repr. London: Virago, 1981), p. 336. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with WITS.

<sup>303</sup> Clephane, p. vii.

<sup>304</sup> Margaret Lawrence, *We Write as Women* (London: Michael Joseph, 1937), p. 150. Lawrence cited Lehmann's *Weather in the Streets* as a highlight among these novels of 'irregular relationships'.

everyday nature of women's lives in these spaces they take them beyond the stereotypes of 'bawdy' houses. Setting their fictional accounts in these liminal spaces enabled the writers to address subjects in literature that would not have fitted into the traditional setting of the family home. These novels covered important social and cultural issues that the cosy domesticity of the women's magazines would rather believe did not exist, such as extra-martial affairs and abortion.<sup>305</sup> In representing these issues, they also highlighted the inequity between women and men, the continuing double standard on sexual morality, and the need for greater access to birth control for women to take control of their own sexuality.

The central relationship of Lehmann's novel, *The Weather in the Streets*, is the affair between Olivia Curtis and Rollo Spencer. The affair is an adulterous one as both Rollo and Olivia are married, but while Rollo is still living with his wife Nicola, Olivia is formally separated from her husband Ivor. Lehmann portrays Olivia as caught in a conflict between the morality of the past and the tentative new sexual freedom of the present, a position that Judy Simons has described as 'a psychological no-man's-land', an apt expression given the shortage of marriage partners after the war.<sup>306</sup> To be a single woman in the 1930s was to occupy a paradoxical position: the image of the sexually liberated bachelor girl co-existed with the sexually frustrated spinster, simultaneously offering both greater freedom and greater societal constraint. Depictions of the unmarried woman reflected the wider debates about women's sexuality and marriage that were taking place in the period.

Olivia is a modern young woman, who lives alone in a single room as the paying guest of her cousin Etty. Lehmann does not attempt to romanticise Olivia's single life; it is portrayed as a struggle as well as a freedom. Olivia's family assume that the situation

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<sup>305</sup> An illegal abortion is also the subject matter of F. Tennyson Jesse's, *A Pin to See the Peepshow* (1934).

<sup>306</sup> Judy Simons, 'Rosamond Lehmann: *The Weather in the Streets*' in *Recharting the Thirties*, ed. by Patrick J. Quinn (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Presses, 1996), pp. 173-186 (p.174).

is temporary and that Olivia will either return to her husband or marry again, as her sister Kate states: “It’s all very well now to knock about London on your own like you do. But you don’t want to do it for ever, do you?” (WITS 48). It is a rhetorical question and Olivia chooses not to answer, she has already had a disagreement with Kate about the ‘respectability’ of her new lifestyle. Kate has informed her that in order to maintain her respectability as a single woman she should not be seen speaking to her former husband in public. Olivia responds with anger: ‘In a public place! ... What a foul expression. You’re as bad as Mother: “Not in front of the servants”’ (WITS 42). Olivia knows how her lifestyle is perceived by others: referring to Mrs Banks, the woman who comes in to clean for Etty, Olivia states, ‘she thinks it’s deplorable the half-hearted spinsterish finicky way we live’ (WITS 167).

Olivia has a job, working in the photography studio of her friend Anna, and this makes her lifestyle a viable alternative to returning to the family home. Having escaped the middle-class respectability of her family, Olivia is physically and economically free to explore her sexuality. However, Olivia is not psychologically free; although she gives the impression of being ‘frightfully unconventional and free-lovish’, she can’t escape her ‘good upbringing’ and the desire for a conventional relationship that is ‘important enough to be for ever’ (WITS 44-5).

Scientific discourse on female sexuality was becoming more widespread in the interwar period. The founders of the modern sexology movement Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, along with Sigmund Freud, all saw their work distributed outside the realms of medicine and law. One of the first popular presentations of Freud’s work appeared in *Good Housekeeping* magazine in an article by Peter Clark MacFarlane in February 1915, ‘Diagnosis by Dreams’, which referred to the importance of Freud’s

work on the female sex drive.<sup>307</sup> The positive aspects of this were the provision of a language in which to discuss sexual matters, and the wider acknowledgment of the existence of women's sexual desire. The negative aspects were the enforcement of existing gender stereotypes, the reinforcement of women's inferiority, and the creation of a scientific definition of normality, or what Jonathan Ned Katz has termed the 'invention of heterosexuality'.<sup>308</sup>

Sexual freedom was only to be encouraged within the confines of heterosexual marriage and in the interwar period sexual advice was circulated widely via the newly created marriage manuals. The most popular of these was Marie Carmichael Stopes's groundbreaking book *Married Love* (1918) that sold over half a million copies by the mid nineteen twenties.<sup>309</sup> Stopes's work was the first sex manual to address the importance of women's sexuality and the need for sexual happiness within marriage, as well as to openly advocate birth control. Like the work of the sexologists, Stopes's work has also been criticised for enforcing a 'normalised' ideal of female sexuality within heterosexual marriage.

For the unmarried woman, this endorsement of sexual activity meant that her celibacy was no longer necessarily considered a virtue or a valid alternative to marriage, instead it was pathologised and she was redefined as sexually deviant. Ellis argued that sexual abstinence could actually prove harmful to the nerves: 'Many vigorous and healthy unmarried women or married women apart from their husbands, living a life of sexual abstinence, have asserted emphatically that only by sexually exciting themselves, at intervals, could they escape from a condition of nervous oppression and sexual obsession

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<sup>307</sup> Peter Clark MacFarlane, 'Diagnosis by Dreams', *Good Housekeeping*, 60 (February 1915), pp. 125-133.

<sup>308</sup> See Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (New York: Dutton, 1995).

<sup>309</sup> Lucy Burke, 'In Pursuit of an Erogamic Life: Marie Stopes and the Culture of Married Love' in *Women's Experience of Modernity 1875-1945*, ed. by Ann L. Ardis and Leslie W. Lewis (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 254-269 (p. 254).

which they felt to be a state of hysteria'.<sup>310</sup> Writing in 1934, Winifred Holtby lamented that women should be 'tormented by the current superstition that madness and bitterness lie in wait for virgins'.<sup>311</sup> These new definitions of sexuality and celibacy overlaid the dominant discourse of marriage and motherhood creating a new inflection to the existing inflexible model of female behaviour.

Lehmann's representation is informed by the historical period in which she was writing. The new discourses of the sexologists transformed the idea of sexual desire into a scientific problem to be investigated, while still relying on unscientific cultural assumptions about gender differences. The positive acknowledgment of women's sexual instinct was tempered by the constant reinforcement of women's inferiority. The double standard against which feminist activists since Josephine Butler had been campaigning, is firmly embedded in these publications and is evident in Krafft-Ebing's assertion that it is far worse for a wife to be unfaithful. The wife who is unfaithful 'should always meet with severer punishment' as she 'not only dishonours herself, but also her husband and her family, not to speak of the possible uncertainty of paternity'.<sup>312</sup> The closing part of Krafft-Ebing's statement pointed to a larger concern with regulating women's procreation in addition to her sexuality.

In his essay of 1908, "Civilized" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness' Sigmund Freud was critical of the social code of sexual morality: that it prohibited sexual intercourse outside of monogamous marriage for women but permitted it for men. Unlike Krafft-Ebing who dictated that different rules apply to men and women, Freud acknowledged the existence of the "double" sexual morality for men' that treats their

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<sup>310</sup> Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: The Evolution of Modesty, the Phenomena of Sexual Periodicity, Autoeroticism* (1896; repr. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Company, 1910), p. 270.

<sup>311</sup> Winifred Holtby, *Women and a Changing Civilisation* (London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1934), p. 133.

<sup>312</sup> Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. by F. J. Rebman, 12th edn (1886; repr. New York: Physicians and Surgeons Book Company, 1934), p. 15.

sexual indiscretions with ‘less severity’. The premium placed on female chastity, Freud stated, is actually detrimental because it keeps women ignorant of sexual matters, and continued suppression of her sexual instinct results in frigidity. Freud’s concern was not with the rights of women to sexual enjoyment; his focus on her frigidity was that it ‘deprives the man of any high degree of sexual enjoyment’. He thus transformed the problem of sexual ignorance into a problem with female sexuality that women need to overcome in order to give pleasure to men.<sup>313</sup>

Freud wrote this essay in 1908 and by the end of the Great War it seems that a fundamental shift was indeed thought to have taken place in “civilized” sexual morality’, away from the Victorian culture of sexual austerity and repression towards the sexual freedom of modernity; in particular the liberation of women’s sexual behaviour. Eustace Chesser, Research Director of the Research Council into Marriage and Human Relationships, carried out a survey on a sample of just over six thousand English women in 1954 in order to understand their experiences and attitudes towards marriage and sexual relationships. The survey indicated that premarital sexual relations increased from nineteen per cent for those born before 1904 to thirty-nine per cent for those born 1914-24, who would have been in their teens and twenties in the 1930s.<sup>314</sup>

Lehmann’s novel reveals that a sexual encounter outside the sanction of marriage is more problematic for a woman than for a man. Olivia can never be the one who is independent, in the way Rollo is: ‘I’m always accessible, waiting for him’ (WITS 168). Rollo can return to his marriage, seemingly untainted by his affair, while Olivia must suffer for her transgressions, dealing with her pregnancy through an illegal abortion. Lehmann makes an important statement that the unwritten rules of behaviour allow the

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<sup>313</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness’ in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, by Sigmund Freud, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, vol. ix (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 179-204 (pp. 195, 182, 198).

<sup>314</sup> Eustace Chesser, *The Sexual, Marital and Family Relationships of the English Woman* (London: Hutchinson’s Medical Publications, 1956), p. 311. The total sample of women who completed questionnaires was 6,251.

single woman to have sex only if it does not threaten the established institution of marriage.

### 3.2 *Rosamond Lehmann, The Weather in the Streets: The Space of the Mistress*

I'd promised I'd never complain or make a scene again; I never have. The Other Woman mustn't make too many demands: Rule the first (WITS 201).

Rollo and Olivia belong to different social classes: Rollo is the son of Sir Spencer, the local aristocrat, while Olivia is from a middle-class family. In her work, *The Novel of Adultery*, Judith Armstrong has drawn attention to the fact that 'authors who deal primarily with an erring husband situate their villains in the upper echelons of society' due to the financial demands of supporting both his wife and his mistress: an 'occupational hazard for the adulterous husband'.<sup>315</sup>

One aspect of the adulterous affair that is neglected in Armstrong's account is the need for anonymous and unobserved places in order for these affairs to succeed. Lehmann's location of Olivia, as a paying guest in a single room in her cousin Etty's house, situates her as being more sexually available than if she were in her family home guarded by her parents. However, because her landlady lives on the premises, liaisons can only take place when Etty is absent.

The historical context of contemporary sexual anxieties is important in Lehmann's novel for it determines the spaces available for alternative relationships. New spaces of encounter emerged in the early twentieth century for unchaperoned meetings between men and women, but the rigid moral distinctions governing the behaviour of an unmarried woman remained. In the introduction to their exploration of the geographies of sexualities, Lynda Johnson and Robyn Longhurst have stated that, 'Place and sexuality are mutually constituted. Sexuality has a profound effect on the way people live in, and

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<sup>315</sup> Judith Armstrong, *The Novel of Adultery* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1976), p. 57.

interact with, space and place'.<sup>316</sup> Space and place become intrinsically linked; the locations in which a relationship is played out determine the type and acceptability of that relationship.

Rollo and Olivia meet each other on a train, a location that Marc Augé would term a 'non-place'; a transitory space 'to be passed through' where individual identity is temporarily suspended for the 'shared identity of passengers'. The trajectory of their affair, from the meeting on the train to the first kiss in Rollo's car, to subsequent encounters in dark restaurants and temporary rooms, reads as one of continuous motion. Olivia compares their relationship to a journey that, like a non-place, exists in a 'perpetual present'.<sup>317</sup> There is no sense of arrival or departure: 'It was then the time began when there wasn't any time. The journey was in the dark, going on without end or beginning, without landmarks, bearings' (WITS 144). This initial meeting sets the transient tone for further illicit encounters and also gives them the sense of urgency of the present moment.

Structured around temporary spaces of sexual encounter, their relationship takes place in a series of rented and borrowed rooms hidden from the public eye: 'He only wanted to be alone somewhere and make love. "Where can we go?" he'd say. "Can we go back to your room?"' (WITS 162). The temporary walls that serve to conceal the relationship between Rollo and Olivia become the defining feature of each encounter. These material places are indicative of the instability and transient nature of their liaison and also point to the moral space their relationship occupies outside the structures of home and family.

In his work on heterotopias, Foucault distinguished between heterotopias of 'crisis' and those of 'deviation'. Heterotopias of crisis are places 'reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state

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<sup>316</sup> Lynda Johnson and Robyn Longhurst, *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>317</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London and New York: Verso 1995), p. 104, 101, 105.

of crisis', that is, a state of transition from one lifestage to another. Foucault uses the example of the honeymoon hotel where the new bride's 'deflowering could take place "nowhere"' (OOS 24). He argued that these places are being replaced by heterotopias of deviation where 'individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed'; he uses the example of places of incarceration such as psychiatric hospitals and prisons (OOS 25). The hotel or boarding house room as a space for the mistress falls between these two: it is a place of crisis, the beginning of a sexual relationship, but because this relationship is not connected to marriage, it is also a place of deviation. These rooms become heterotopias where the behaviour of individuals outside 'the required mean or norm are placed', and where, sequestered in their hotel room, their behaviour can be contained.

Relegated to the margins by respectable society, the relationship between Rollo and Olivia must also be conducted in marginal places: 'It was always indoors or in taxis or in his warm car; it was mostly in the safe dark, or in half-light in the deepest corner of the restaurant, as out of sight as possible' (WITS 145). It is a hotel existence that is only real within these temporary spaces of encounter, but can never be permanently accommodated within a society where there is no place for relationships outside marriage. Because it can have no public face, their relationship becomes one of claustrophobic spatial confinement, like the imprisoning heterotopias of deviation: 'the queer frightening room, so unconnected with any kind of room we'd ever known [...] sealing us in together' (WITS 173).

Their first weekend away is spent in two very different hotels. The first night is spent in a 'new first-class modern hotel' in Bournemouth (WITS 171) and the next night in Salisbury in 'one of those country-town hotels with rambling, uneven passages [...] a smell of hotel everywhere – dust and beer and cheese, and old carpets and polish' (WITS 173). While the first hotel is a neutral space with a sense of detachment created by its

new modernity, the older hotel has a sense of history and other people that evokes the values of the past and the normalised sexual conventions from which they are attempting to escape.

De Certeau has argued that if an individual lacks a space of their own, it can be created through skilled appropriation and tactics. Rollo and Olivia have no sense of belonging to these rooms they inhabit, so Olivia attempts to appropriate them through their shared memories, to anchor the relationship to the material and the real. Before she visits Rollo's home, Olivia wonders 'what kind of rooms Nicola [ha]d made' (WITS 147). Olivia draws on the convention of women making a home for her husband, and by extension for their relationship, in her attempts to construct a shared domestic space for her and Rollo to inhabit through narrative. The affair is kept in the perpetual present by inscribing it into the memory of the various hotel rooms they have shared. Rollo colludes with the game of joint memory: 'What a lot of funny rooms we've been in together, haven't we, darling?' (WITS 325). Narrating a history creates what de Certeau has termed 'a fictional space' (PEL 79); the shared narrative constructs a private landscape that can serve to validate that fiction. By constructing a narrative for the affair, it is given a secure and defined outline. This is reflected in Lehmann's decision to position Olivia as the narrator at a spatial and temporal distance from the affair; she is looking back over the events with the sense of trying to re-create and understand the relationship through the narration. When the 'ordinary man *becomes* the narrator' (PEL 5), individuals become active users and interpreters of place and they are able to adapt their surroundings achieving autonomy within their space.

The series of rooms becomes a system of representation. Their affair is carried out in what Lefebvre would argue is representational space, the lived space that is produced by the activities of users who appropriate that space for themselves. Representational spaces are 'linked to the clandestine or underground side of social life' (POS 33) and

provide a location for transgressions. Their relationship has an existence in the appropriated space of temporary rooms that is created independently of those who own and control the rooms, thus these representational spaces are those in 'which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate' (POS 39). The rooms become temporary refuges from the world where Rollo and Olivia construct their own reality.

### **Domesticating Space**

Their first sexual encounter takes place in Olivia's room. Lehmann describes Olivia's room in terms of possessions that mean something to Olivia: her books, a picture bought with her former husband, the shade on the bedside table made by her friend Anna. Rollo's entry into her room reveals more than Olivia's physical body, for in revealing her room she opens herself for criticism and judgement. Lehmann foregrounds Olivia's concern of how her room, and by extension herself, appear to an outsider: 'He must think everything nice, not tartish' (WITS 152). Rollo's presence transforms Olivia's bedroom from a site of everyday living into a temporary space of desire. The bedroom becomes the border between self and other; no longer a private space, an enclosure of her interiority, it becomes exterior and her interiority is brought to the surface and exhibited for Rollo's gaze. After making love Rollo compliments Olivia on her 'Nice room' (WITS 154).

Olivia's visit to Rollo's home brings her status as mistress, and the outsider position she is forced to occupy as the 'other' woman, into sharp relief. Lehmann depicts the way Olivia experiences Rollo's home spatially by showing her approach the house alone and look in through the window from the street outside: 'From outside the room looked warm, rich and snug – a first-class comfortable home'. The description evokes the comfort and security that Bachelard associates with the family home, but Olivia is 'hiding from his home' (WITS 184) and is only able to look at that domestic scene from a covert

distance. Their relationship is created in a series of rooms, and it is in a room that it is ultimately destroyed. The materiality of Rollo's house brings home the reality of the wife: 'I've seen your home, she's real, I'm jealous of her' (WITS 193).

Nicola's home could also be perceived as a surface construction, concealing the underlying problems with her relationship, but in her case the sanction of marriage protects this space. Written into the depiction of Nicola is her lack of sexual desire, which causes her to become neurasthenic. Lehmann uses this image of the repressed wife in the house to contrast with the perceived freedom of the other woman. Before she had visited Rollo's home Olivia had viewed Nicola as an unreal possession of Rollo's that must be kept safe in the house: 'A beautiful protected doll is in his house, not a wife' (WITS 164). However, Lehmann's narrative concludes that this freedom is as much an illusion. Marriage is still what provides the economic and emotional security for women. In a previous encounter in a restaurant with Rollo's friend and his friend's new wife, Lehmann had also demonstrated Olivia's sense of being excluded from scenes of domestic intimacy and from the protection that marriage affords women: 'They were all safe except me, she was his new wife, not his new mistress, they were against me....' (WITS 163). The new wife is safely enclosed, protected by marriage, while Olivia is on the outside.

The instability of the hotel room is produced in opposition to the stability of Rollo's home. This serves to highlight Olivia's position as an outsider, not only in terms of the relationship, but also in terms of social class. As Olivia looks in to the 'first-class' home, like the 'first-class' hotels that Rollo has the money to buy, Lehmann draws attention to the contrast between Olivia's insecure life of poverty alone in her single room and the security of Rollo in his stable space supported by his wife. Olivia knows that Rollo will not understand her kind of life, 'not bed-sitting-rooms and studios of that sort; not that drifting about for inexpensive meals [...] waging the unrewarding, everlasting

war on grubbiness – rinsing out, mending stockings for to-morrow’ (WITS 77). As a rich man, Rollo can possess both wife and mistress, each contained within their separate sexual spaces: his wife static and confined within the home through nervous illness. Olivia is mobile and transient, moving from her own bedroom to a series of rented and borrowed spaces. These transitory spaces become perfect for transgressions.

There is no spatial ambiguity in Rollo’s house, the divisions are clear. The difference between the mistress and the wife is articulated through the spaces they inhabit. Architecture situates the mistress in this text in the temporary spaces of sexual fantasy and the wife in the permanent domestic space where sexual activity is for reproductive purposes only. The social and cultural conditions of the nineteen thirties make this binary into a vast divide between the space of the respectable and non-respectable woman. The mobility of their relationship reflects on Olivia; traversing these transient spaces unconfined by marriage, she is also perceived as sexually mobile and outside her ‘proper’ place.

### **3.3 Shifting Moralities: The Amateur Prostitute in Jean Rhys’s *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* and *Voyage in the Dark***

The home, with its connection to the family, has been viewed as the traditional enclosure for female sexuality. However, when the woman was a mistress or a lover, the boarding house, hotel, or private flat became an alternative way in which to contain the relationship. The need to maintain a physical space for the mistress can be seen as a form of ownership of her sexuality and an attempt to domesticate the independent woman. Rollo’s frustration at the lack of places available for him to meet Olivia in private leads him to suggest renting a room or a flat for her:

Driving back he’d say: “Is there *nowhere* we can go? ... [...] Then he said couldn’t we take a room, why didn’t I let him rent a flat for me or something. But, no, I said, no. [...] I didn’t want even the shadow of a situation the world

recognises and tolerates as long as it's *sub rosa*, decent, discreet; that means a word in the ear, a wink, an eye at the keyhole (WITS 165).

Occupying accommodation owned by Rollo would situate Olivia into the space of the mistress; a social space that is recognised and tolerated by the upper classes of the period as long as it is 'decent, discreet'. Rollo's containment of Olivia would give him possession of her and she would be located where she could always be found and controlled. Lefebvre would argue that this is dominated space, and Olivia's spatial practices, her movements both inside and outside that space, would be constrained by Rollo's ownership. The implication of the arrangement is that Olivia would always be sexually available for Rollo in return for his monetary investment. The situation would provide Olivia with a certain measure of security, but one that is only obtained by sacrificing her independence: 'it was pride. I wouldn't be a kept woman' (WITS 158). The term 'kept woman' is often synonymous with prostitution although, unlike the prostitute, the kept woman would be the property of one man who would provide for her keep as well as providing a form of accommodation, somewhere physically to keep her.

The category of the 'amateur prostitute' emerged in interwar Britain to define women who, unlike professional prostitutes, would engage in sexual acts ostensibly for free, but would often receive alternative forms of payment, such as gifts in return. In her 1928 book *Motherhood and its Enemies*, Charlotte Haldane, a novelist who was also involved in the suffrage movement, viewed the amateur as a 'formidable competitor' to the professional prostitute, a threat to the stability of marriage and the family.<sup>318</sup> Haldane argued that motherhood was the natural condition of women and that women's sexuality should be confined to the boundaries of marriage. Sue Thomas has commented that Haldane's argument is 'implicitly articulating a healthy, bourgeois, feminine, domestic,

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<sup>318</sup> Charlotte Haldane, *Motherhood and its Enemies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. 95.

and maternal identity by producing the amateur prostitute as one of its others'.<sup>319</sup> The hostility towards the promiscuous woman reflected the concerns in the interwar period with the falling birth rate and the fear that increasing female sexual autonomy would lead to women choosing sexual pleasure outside the moral sanctity of marriage.

Recent critics such as Lucy Bland have argued that the term amateur 'reflected a difficulty in understanding active female sexuality outside the institution of prostitution'.<sup>320</sup> Unable to accept an evolving sexual freedom for women that challenged the clear distinction of the wife in the house and the prostitute on the streets, the amateur needed to be categorised so she could be pilloried. This took the form of a moral panic about the spread of venereal disease, as well as increasing sexual immorality and illegitimate births.

Olivia resists the role of amateur partly because she wants to reject the role of mistress and maintain the illusion that her relationship with Rollo is more than a temporary liaison. Lehmann depicts the struggle between Olivia's need to maintain her freedom, to work and live independently, and her desire for the things that money could buy:

I wouldn't let him give me clothes, though I longed for new things to wear for him. He wanted to buy me frocks but I said no. It was partly not liking to dwell on how much I needed them, would like them – he couldn't bear to feel I was poor and had to work – partly the impossibility of appearing suddenly in new things and everybody wondering, guessing (WITS 158).

Lehmann makes it clear that for Olivia the position of amateur would lead to a loss of agency. The role of amateur could provide sexual and economic autonomy for some women and it could even be viewed as a powerful position in some circumstances. In Rebecca West's short story 'The Abiding Vision' (1935), Lily has the arrangement of an amateur with her married lover Sam: 'She gave him to understand, not crudely but quite

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<sup>319</sup> Sue Thomas, *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (Westport, CA: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. 68.

<sup>320</sup> Lucy Bland, "'Guardians of the Race', or 'Vampires Upon the Nation's Health'? Female Sexuality and its Regulation in Early Twentieth-century Britain' in *The Changing Experience of Women*, ed. by Elizabeth Whitelegg and others (Oxford: Martha Robinson, 1982), pp. 373-88 (p. 381).

definitely, that if she yielded to him she would expect very shortly afterwards to move into another apartment; and that, if he did not accept her conditions, there was somebody else who would'. West depicts the role of the amateur as a valid option for women, she demonstrates that Sam's investment in Lily provides her with the security that the affair will be for the long-term, rather than a one-night stand: 'It was just stiff enough to make a man think twice before he left a woman in whom he had sunk so much money'.<sup>321</sup> Although this suggests independence, it is a precarious autonomy; in their reliance on masculine favours for economic support the women become sexual commodities that can be bought and sold.

The characters in Jean Rhys's interwar novels play out all aspects of their daily lives in the threshold spaces between public and private and between inside and outside, in cafés, bars, hotels, and boarding houses. They also traverse the social and sexual boundaries between wife, mistress and amateur prostitute.

Rhys demonstrates that becoming an amateur is not always a choice. After her husband is arrested and imprisoned in *Quartet* (1928), Marya Zelli is taken into the home of British ex-patriots Lois and Hugh Heidler, where she soon discovers that the price of her room and board is to be paid by her becoming a mistress to Heidler. Lois and Heidler project their fantasies onto Marya, casting her as a child and themselves as controlling parents. This role distorts the transition Marya has already made from child to wife; problematically she must regress to innocent child while performing the sexual role of mistress. Marya's refusal to live with the couple results in a further transition from mistress to amateur: 'he was forcing her to be nothing but the little woman who lived in the Hôtel du Bosphore for the express purpose of being made love to'.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> Rebecca West, 'The Abiding Vision' in *The Harsh Voice* by Rebecca West (London: Virago, 1982), pp. 189-251 (p. 195, 197).

<sup>322</sup> Jean Rhys, *Quartet* (1928; repr. London: Penguin, 2000), p. 92.

In *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Rhys's character Anna Morgan is also drawn naively into the world of the amateur as she moves from an innocent, virginal eighteen year old, to taking money and clothes from her lover Walter Jeffries. Although her friend Maudie urges Anna to 'make him give you a flat', the temporary nature of Anna's relationship is highlighted by the fact that Walter only feels the need to provide Anna with money for rented rooms and never provides her with a permanent home.<sup>323</sup>

The landladies are critical of Anna and her friend Maudie, their occupations as actresses place them on the borders of respectability:

The landlady had said, "No, I don't let to professionals." But she didn't bang the door in our faces, and after Maudie had talked for a while, making her voice sound as ladylike as possible, she had said, "Well, I might make an exception for this time." Then the second day we were there she made a row because we both got up late and Maudie came downstairs in her nightgown and a torn kimono (VD 8).

Rhys indicates the landlady's worries about her house being mistaken for a brothel because she has let rooms to actresses: 'Getting my house a bad name' (VD 8). This highlights a widely held association in the interwar years between the occupation of dancer or actress with prostitution.<sup>324</sup> The situation is ironically reversed later in the novel when Anna is given a room in Ethel's flat, and her friends question the 'massage' services provided by Ethel. This time it is Anna's new landlady who is keen to emphasise 'how respectable she was' (VD 119). Ethel does this through a comparison that makes her own venture seem all the more questionable:

If I were to tell you all I know about some of the places that advertise massage. That Madame Fernande, for instance – well, the things I've heard about her and the girls she's got at her place. And how she manages to do it without getting into trouble I don't know. I expect it costs her something (VD 119).

At the beginning of the novel Anna's innocence is genuine, but in the eyes of the men she meets it is thought to be part of the chorus troupe act, a masquerade of femininity

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<sup>323</sup> Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; repr. London: Penguin, 2000), p. 41. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with *VD*.

<sup>324</sup> Carolyn Janice Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 54.

designed to encourage the favours of men. Mr Jones jokes when Anna tells him her age that, ‘You girls have only two ages. You’re eighteen and so of course your friend’s twenty-two’ (VD 12). To them a woman who can be picked up on the street and who works in the theatre is a woman whose actions are all pre-scripted. However, when Anna attempts to construct a narrative that matches the illusion others have of her and tells Walter she is not a virgin, he accuses her of lying:

“I’m not telling lies, but it doesn’t matter, anyway,” I said. “People have made all that up”

“Oh yes, it matters. It’s the only thing that matters”

“It’s not the only thing that matters,” I said. “All that’s made up” (VD 32).

Rhys demonstrates Anna’s awareness that the cultural expectations surrounding women’s sexuality are all ‘made up’. Marya in *Quartet* has learned that ‘everyone pretends’ and she has learned to play a role: ‘She learned, after long and painstaking effort, to talk like a chorus girl, to dress like a chorus girl and to think like a chorus girl – up to a point’.<sup>325</sup> Maudie, a fellow chorus girl, coaches Anna in the role of amateur, ‘don’t get sappy about him that’s fatal. The thing with men is to get everything you can out of them and not care a damn’ (VD 38-9). Anna rapidly learns that in return for Walter’s affections she will receive money, ‘It was as if I had always lived like that’ (VD 35). Even the money becomes easily accepted, ‘I was accustomed to it already. It was as if I had always had it’ (VD 24). The money enables Anna to buy the clothes she believes will transform her physical appearance, and which in turn will transform her life, ‘Everything makes you want pretty clothes like hell. People laugh at girls who are badly dressed’ (VD 22).

When Anna goes to Cohen’s dress shop with money given to her by Walter the reality of the store recedes into future illusion: ‘This is a beginning. Out of this warm room that smells of fur I’ll go to all the lovely places I’ve ever dreamt of’ (VD 25). In the dress shop, fantasy and reality collide, but in exchanging Walter’s money for clothes to

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<sup>325</sup> Rhys, *Quartet*, pp. 9, 15.

transform herself, Anna is also transformed into a commodity that Walter has purchased.

Rachel Bowlby has argued that

Consumer culture transforms the narcissistic mirror into a shop window, the glass which reflects an idealized image of the woman (or man) who stands before it [...] Through the glass, the woman sees what she wants and what she wants to be.<sup>326</sup>

Trying on the dress in the shop Anna is unable to reconcile the reflected image of the dress with herself: “‘Yes, I like this. I’ll keep it on.’ But my face in the glass looked small and frightened’ (VD 25). Reality intrudes into the illusion when Anna returns home and her transformation is read in a different way by her landlady, who connects the acquisition of the new clothes with immoral money, labelling her a tart: ‘Crawling up the stairs at three o’clock in the morning. And then today dressed up to the nines. I’ve got eyes in my head [...] I don’t want no tarts in my house’ (VD 26).

The illusion to which Anna aspires is not only one of love and romance, but to a permanent relationship that Walter that will give her a valid social position in life:

Everyone says, ‘Get on.’ Of course, some people do get on. Yes, but how many? What about what’s-her-name? She got on, didn’t she? ‘Chorus-Girl Marries Peer’s Son.’ Well, *what* about her? Get on or get out, they say (VD 64).

Anna is unable to ‘get on’ and move beyond the temporary relationships. Despite her attempts at seizing control of her life through a calculated flaunting of her innocent femininity in her role as amateur, her pregnancy demonstrates the lack of control women had over their bodies in the early twentieth-century. Following Anna’s near death after an illegal abortion, the doctor’s words that she will be ‘Ready to start all over again in no time’ (VD 159), implies that it is an endless cycle, and that a woman in her position can only continue to survive economically through her sexuality. I will return briefly to this novel in Chapter 4, in order to discuss Anna’s Creole background, and how caught

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<sup>326</sup> Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), p. 32.

between her current life in London and the memories of her home in the West Indies, Anna must also negotiate the transition between racial and cultural designations.

### **Economic Freedoms: ‘Going from Man to Man had become a Habit’**

In his 1934 book *Sex and Revolution*, the Marxist writer Alec Craig argued that it is essential to progress that ‘women should be free to evolve a sex morality compatible with economic freedom’.<sup>327</sup> In other words, their new freedoms in earning their own living and supporting themselves economically, should translate to increased freedom in their sexual relations. In reality, women’s sexual emancipation could never equal any economic independence; even though women’s sexual liberation may have been discussed more openly in some circles, women’s sexuality continued to be constrained by societal convention. Jeffrey Weeks emphasises this conflict, pointing out that there was ‘a relaxation in the 1920s and 1930s of the discretion concerning conjugal sex – but no relenting on the question of extra-marital or non-heterosexual sex’.<sup>328</sup> Women’s sexuality was also regulated by limited access to contraception and abortion was illegal; ensuring the consequence for unmarried women who did attempt to embrace these new sexual freedoms was likely to be an unwanted pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease.

The abrupt cessation of her regular maintenance cheques from her former lover Mr Mackenzie leaves Julia Martin, the central character of Jean Rhys’s novel *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), financially dependent on her role as amateur. Rhys depicts Julia as motivated purely by economic reasons rather than sexual pleasure and she appears to derive very little autonomy from her situation. Her loss of regular income from Mr Mackenzie’s weekly cheques leaves her with no alternative sources of money. Although she has family, her sister and mother are too poor to help, and her more distant relatives

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<sup>327</sup> Alec Craig, *Sex and Revolution* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934), p. 93.

<sup>328</sup> Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800*, 2nd edn, (London and New York: Longman, 1989), p. 206.

refuse. It is clear that her family disapprove of the kind of life she leads: 'But it was obvious that she had been principally living on the money given to her by various men. Going from man to man had become a habit'.<sup>329</sup> It is a habit that is difficult to escape, as Julia tells Mr Mackenzie: 'a time comes in your life when, if you have any money, you can go one way. But if you have nothing at all – absolutely nothing at all – and nowhere to get anything, then you go another' (ALMM 20).

Julia is portrayed as an outwardly passive character, but in the majority of cases she is the one whom initiates the meetings with her former lovers and the gifting of money. Rhys demonstrates the difficulties of this during an awkward conversation between Julia and Mr Horsfield, a gentleman she had met previously in Paris and whom she had contacted on her return to London to ask for his financial assistance: 'It was stupid that, when you had done this sort of thing a hundred times, you still felt nervous and shivered as you were doing it' (ALMM 64).

Resisting the temptations of life as an amateur is easier for Olivia who is able to make just enough money to support herself through her employment, but for Julia the situation is more difficult. She 'had been an artist's model. At one time she had been a mannequin' (ALMM, 20), but both are roles that depend on youthful good looks and cannot be maintained into middle age. The nineteen thirties was a time of growing awareness of the economic plight of the older unmarried woman. Women who did not marry would often find that their earnings would decline in middle age, or that they would have breaks due to unemployment or looking after elderly relatives, which made saving for the future difficult. In 1931 just under seventy-five per cent of unmarried women aged twenty-five to forty-four were employed; however that number drops to forty-four per cent for those aged forty-five to sixty-four and eleven per cent for those aged over

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<sup>329</sup> Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930; repr. London: Penguin, 2000), p. 20. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with ALMM.

sixty-five.<sup>330</sup> Writing in 1916 a campaigner for women's suffrage, Wilma Meikle, pointed out that it was 'practically impossible for a woman to provide for her old age by her earnings, there is always rather more than a sporting chance that marriage will give her security'.<sup>331</sup>

Two campaigning groups were formed in the thirties to address these issues: The Over Thirty Association and The National Spinsters' Pension Association. The Over Thirty Association addressed the issues of unemployment and affordable housing for women over the age of thirty. The National Spinsters' Pension Association was formed in 1935 by Florence White and was the largest women's reform movement of the 1930s. Their Spinsters' Charter was published in 1936 with the aim: 'To obtain Pensions for spinsters who contribute to National Health Insurance, at 55 years of age'. One of their key arguments was that the 1925 pension act had given pensions to 'young and able-bodied widows [...] some even in their early twenties and childless', while 'the spinster must go on' until she is sixty-five.<sup>332</sup> A woman with incomplete contributory pension records would have to rely on household means-tested public assistance or wait for a means-tested pension at the age of seventy. The Association used the argument that the state should provide for these women 'who but for the war may not have been a Spinster' in an attempt to gain sympathy for their cause by drawing on a universally accepted mythology of the spinster as consigned to 'imaginary widowhood' by the war.<sup>333</sup> While unsuccessful in its original aims, the Association played an important role in reducing women's retirement age to sixty in 1940. What should also not be underestimated is the significance of these campaigns for drawing attention to the economic instability of the unmarried woman.

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<sup>330</sup> John Macnicol, *The Politics of Retirement in Britain: 1878-1948* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 309.

<sup>331</sup> Wilma Meikle, *Towards a Sane Feminism* (London: Grant Richards, 1916), p. 166.

<sup>332</sup> Florence White, *The Spinsters' Charter* (Bradford: National Spinsters' Pensions Association, 1936), pp. 1, 2.

<sup>333</sup> White, p. 5; Holden, p. 83.

### **‘It Might Have Been Anywhere’**

Without employment, family support, or provision for the future there is always the need for the single woman to think about money for food and rent on a daily basis. On her return to London Julia is confronted with the constant need to provide for herself: ‘This place tells you all the time, “Get money, get money get money, or be for ever damned”’ (ALMM 65). For Rhys’s characters the opportunity to remain in the same place is determined by their finances. Julia moves through a series of hotel and boarding house rooms after her affair with Mr Mackenzie finishes. She begins in a hotel room in Paris, ‘a lowdown sort of place and the staircase smelt of the landlady’s cats’ (ALMM 7). The landlady ‘had been suspicious and inclined to be hostile because she disapproved of Julia’s habit of coming home at night accompanied by a bottle. A man, yes; a bottle no’ (ALMM 9).

Rhys devotes the opening pages of the novel to a description and characterisation not of Julia, but of her hotel room. Architecturally, the room has ‘a sombre and one-eyed aspect because the solitary window was very much to one side’ (ALMM 7). The ‘one-eyed aspect’ of the room gives it a human disposition and evokes the sinister sense that Julia is being watched. The solitary eye, like the alert gaze of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, makes the occupant of the room ‘constantly visible’, although in this case rather than being observed by an unseen person, it is the room itself that is monitoring Julia.<sup>334</sup> By not ‘placing’ Julia within the room Rhys conveys the notion that Julia herself is somehow out of place: ‘Her career of ups and downs had rubbed most of the hall-marks off her, so that it was not easy to guess at her age, her nationality, or the social background to which she properly belonged’ (ALMM 11).

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<sup>334</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 200.

The room functions as both a place of exposure and a protective enclosure, Julia wants to hide away and, initially, ‘locked in her room – she felt safe’ (ALMM 9), but the room can never provide the real seclusion she craves. Bachelard described the function of the house as protection for the dreamer, ‘the house allows one to dream in peace’ (PS 6); but a hotel room does not provide that secure shelter. Julia is unable to escape the outside world by spending the day in bed dreaming because the chambermaid constantly intrudes wanting to clean the room. The implication of surveillance highlights the functioning of power within the room; although the door can be locked it is not a private space as both the landlady and the chambermaid have keys. Julia cannot ‘dream in peace’, for when she is locked up with her thoughts they often become ‘confused and frightening’ (ALMM 9). Instead of implying privacy, Rhys’s phrase ‘locked in her room’ suggests that Julia is trapped in a prison of her own creation and, as the novel progresses, Rhys shows how the room transforms itself from a place of incarceration to a place of interment: ‘It’s like being buried alive’ (ALMM 75).

Rhys’s initial description of the room develops into a textual still life of the furnishings that represent the decay of a former bourgeois interior. They give the outward illusion of opulence, but it is a grandeur ravaged by time:

The bed was large and comfortable, covered with an imitation satin quilt of faded pink. There was a wardrobe without a looking-glass, a red plush sofa and – opposite the bed and reflecting it – a very spotted mirror in a gilt frame. [...] At the farther end of it stood an unframed oil-painting [...] it had probably been left in payment of a debt (ALMM 8).

The satin quilt is ‘faded’ and the mirror ‘spotted’; its frame ‘gilt’ not gold. The room has become an anonymous space, furnished with things that indicate a presence that is now an absence from the missing looking-glass on the wardrobe to the painting left behind by a previous occupant. The tawdry furnishings give the hotel room the artificial appearance of a stage setting, or a room in a brothel. The satin quilt and red plush sofa can be read as sexualised props, sites for seduction.

Having exhausted the possibility of finding another man willing to provide financial assistance in Paris, Julia decides to go to London where her impoverished sister Norah lives with their dying mother. The decline in Julia's fortunes is reflected in the contrast between the Parisian hotel, where the wallpaper is described as 'cheerful and rather stimulating' (ALMM 8), and the dismal Bloomsbury hotel in London that has made no attempt at interior decoration. It is a functional, unembellished space, furnished with an 'iron bedstead', 'old-fashioned washstand' and 'tin slop-pail' (ALMM 47).

Julia's sister Norah is shocked at the hotel room, 'an awful place', and suggests the more respectable alternative: 'Why don't you go to a boarding-house?' (ALMM 55). The interior of Julia's London boarding house imitates the respectable interior of the middle-class home, 'crammed with unwieldy furniture covered with chintz' (ALMM 109). The artificial setting created by situating items from the private interior to form an imitation 'home' reflects the displacement Julia feels from her interior space. The Parisian hotel and London boarding house contain vestiges of a previous time, what de Certeau refers to as 'presences of diverse absences', that turn these interiors into archives of the past (PEL 108). Each room has a history; things are broken, stained, marked. Benjamin has argued that these vestiges of individuality imprinted on the home were intended to 'compensate for the absence of any trace of private life in the big city', and secure private life within the individual interior, but in this case their absence serves to highlight the lack of ownership and personal trace that can be left on a transient space.<sup>335</sup> Unlike Olivia's room in *The Weather in the Streets*, filled with personal possessions and memories, the rooms occupied by Rhys's characters are empty spaces and no attempt has been made to appropriate or personalise them.

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<sup>335</sup> Benjamin, *Arcades*, 'Exposé of 1939', p. 20.

In their introduction to *The Spatial Turn*, Barney Warf and Santa Arias remind us that ‘*where* events unfold is integral to *how* they take shape’.<sup>336</sup> Locating activities in particular places can define their visibility and social acceptance. Rhys’s novel highlights the difference in behaviour that can take place in a hotel room compared to a boarding house room. The more respectable boarding house in London is not such an anonymous space that would allow her to bring home a man or a bottle, and once there Julia’s behaviour is more closely monitored. It is the landlady’s home and residents do not pass through after only a single night. The landlady protects the respectability of her house by controlling the behaviour of her guests. As Foucault has argued, ‘one of the primary objects of discipline is to fix; it is an anti-nomadic technique’.<sup>337</sup> It is not only the landlady who maintains a watchful, panoptic eye; it is also the other guests, who peer through half opened doors, ‘staring at her with curiosity’ (ALMM 91).

Rhys entitles the scene when Mr Horsfield first comes back to Julia’s Notting Hill boarding house, ‘It Might Have Been Anywhere’. This emphasises that Julia is not taking him back to her home, but to a temporary space, much like any other she has inhabited. In *Streetwalking the Metropolis* Deborah Parsons has argued that Rhys’s characters have ‘no claim on these places for identity. Indeed the places themselves are paradoxically places of non-place, places of the dispossessed’.<sup>338</sup> Notting Hill was an area of ‘extreme contrasts’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ‘fine houses and noxious slums existing in close proximity’, and the boarding houses often blurred the boundaries between the two.<sup>339</sup> Rhys’s sub-title also indicates the transactional nature of Julia’s arrangement with Mr Horsfield, that it is viewed as something temporary and meaningless that can take place anywhere.

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<sup>336</sup> Barney Warf and Santa Arias, ‘Introduction: The Reinsertion of space into the Social Sciences and Humanities in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Barney Warf and Santa Arias (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 1-10 (p.10).

<sup>337</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 218.

<sup>338</sup> Parsons, p. 136.

<sup>339</sup> Hibbert, p. 595.

Like Rollo, Mr Horsfield has his own flat in Holland Park, but although geographically close to Notting Hill where Julia's boarding house is, Mr Horsfield keeps a spatial distance between the two locales. His home remains private, untainted by his relationship with Julia. Rhys implies that Mr Horsfield would rather risk a liaison in her boarding house room, and Julia being turned out, than allow her to contaminate his private space. When Julia takes Mr Horsfield back to her boarding house room, they do not have the luxury of her landlady or the other residents' absence. Julia asks what will happen if anyone sees him and Mr Horsfield thinks: 'Well, you'll get turned out, my girl, that's a sure thing', but to Julia he says: 'It looks to me as if everybody in here has gone to bed long ago'. When he feels Julia shivering, 'This added to his sensation of excitement and triumph' (ALMM 109). For Mr Horsfield the excitement is achieved by the location of the encounter as much as the person.

To move to the more respectable boarding house, Julia must acquire money from another of her former lovers. She is then forced to move on from that boarding house after she brings Mr Horsfield back to her room: 'It isn't the first time she's been turned out of a room, that's clear' (ALMM 124). In the city where things are constantly moving the place of the home has often been seen as stable; however, stability in the city is dependent and provisional. Both Julia's sexual and intellectual freedom is curtailed by her sex and her economic circumstances. Rhys's novel highlights that money is the biggest problem for single women attempting to lead an independent life.

After Julia has been asked to leave the boarding house, Rhys indicates Mr Horsfield's anxiety to 'place' Julia somewhere:

She must be taken somewhere [...] She must have a bed to sleep in, food, clothes, companionship [...] But he must find a room for her. He would have to. In Paddington or obscurer Bloomsbury (ALMM 122).

The locations of Paddington and Bloomsbury are defined by their distance to Mr Horsfield's home in Holland Park, with Bloomsbury being the furthest away. This need

to compartmentalise Julia into a particular space that will not encroach on his 'other' life is apparent. This spatial differentiation serves to reinforce the unequal social relationship between them; like Rollo he can afford to pay for the woman and the space in which to keep her. Julia is not necessarily seeking the security of one man. Rhys demonstrates in the final pages that Julia has far more control over the situation than has been previously indicated: she has no more need of Mr Horsfield as another former lover, Mr James, has sent her twenty pounds: 'he never used to talk to me much. I was for sleeping with – not for talking to' (ALMM 125). The final page of the novel has Julia encounter Mr Mackenzie and bluntly ask for a hundred francs, to which he responds: 'Good Lord, yes' (ALMM 138). Despite the economic insecurity of her life, Julia's habit is continuing to pay.

Both Lehmann and Rhys highlight the impossibility of universalising women's experiences. Lehmann's heroine struggles economically, but she comes from a middle-class family. Although she never asks her family for money, there is the implication that it may be a possibility, whereas for Julia it is not an option. Both Olivia and Julia are drawn back to the family home by a sick parent and these scenes provide an insight into not only the disapproval their independent lifestyles elicit from both their families, but also the contrast in their sisters, Kate and Norah. Kate epitomises the feminine ideal; she has made a successful marriage with four children. Norah provides the alternative contrast of the spinster lifestyle; as the only daughter remaining at home she has sacrificed herself to look after her mother: 'Norah herself was labelled for all to see. She was labelled "Middle class, no money". Hardly enough to keep herself in clean linen. And yet scrupulously, fiercely clean' (ALMM 53). Both are placed in domestic, caring roles, while Olivia and Julia are positioned outside the domestic, the homely, and the familiar.

The roles played by Kate and Norah highlight how, despite new possibilities opening up for women to live independent lives, the expectation set for women's behaviour was still confined to a narrow range of acceptability outside of those roles. Julia's Uncle Griffiths refuses to give Julia money: 'He said that he had not got any money and that if he had he would not give it to Julia, certainly not, but to her sister Norah, and that he would like to help Norah, because she was a fine girl, and she deserved it' (ALMM 60). The implicit statement is that Norah is the deserving one because she has remained at home and that even her poverty is more respectable.

### 3.4 Long-term Companions, Intimate Friendships and Lesbianism

In her book *Marriage as a Trade* (1909), the playwright and suffrage supporter Cicely Hamilton argued that marriage is a 'trade undertaking', but unlike the profession of prostitution, the position of wife was not a livelihood and is 'ill paid simply because it is largely compulsory'. Hamilton advocated that it was only by women actively choosing to 'do without marriage – and do without it gladly' that conditions can be improved for both married and unmarried women.<sup>340</sup>

For the middle-class spinster, her family would often determine her living space and this in turn would dictate her freedom. In Sylvia Townsend Warner's novel *Lolly Willowes* (1926), the unmarried Laura Willowes remains happily at home as a companion to her father. Upon his death Laura's relatives 'took it for granted that she should be absorbed into the household of one brother or the other', and she is passed to her brother Henry and his family 'as if she were a piece of family property'.<sup>341</sup> She is established in their spare room where she takes on the role of Aunt Lolly, the spinster aunt: 'so useful

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<sup>340</sup> Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1909), pp.19, 248, 275.

<sup>341</sup> Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes or The Loving Huntsman* (1926; Repr. London: Virago, 2000), p. 6.

and obliging and negligible'.<sup>342</sup> Davidoff has outlined how despite the perceived idea that the spinster was outside the family,

Many single women capitalized on the need families had of their services; the family could become a refuge from the shame of spinsterhood, or a cause which offered them alternative identities and justifications for not marrying.<sup>343</sup>

The domestic tasks of child care and family support that the working-class unmarried woman provided to the middle classes in return for wages and a home, the middle-class spinster provided for her extended family without charge in return for not being left homeless. Discussing the social position of spinsters in mid-Victorian Britain, Michael Anderson has pointed out that unmarried women were over-represented in institutions, such as workhouses and asylums, and that a high proportion of those in lunatic asylums were former governesses, reflecting 'the problematical status of such women in the households in which they resided' and the 'weak social situation' of the spinster.<sup>344</sup>

Although Laura remains in her brother's family home for twenty years, she becomes increasingly aware that there is a life of her own to live. She moves out of her brother's house, despite family disapproval, and takes rooms in Mrs Leak's cottage in the isolated village of Great Mop: 'Mrs Leak was an excellent cook; she attended to her lodger civilly and kindly enough, made no comments, and showed no curiosity'.<sup>345</sup> With this new freedom, Laura can live an autonomous life of her own dictated only by her own choices.

In the interwar period single women had greater freedom to choose to live alone, or to set up homes with friends in shared flats and houses. Not only was sharing with another woman an alternative to living alone, it was also more economically viable and a way of escaping the oppression of the family home without marriage. These women

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<sup>342</sup> Warner, p. 163.

<sup>343</sup> Davidoff and others, *The Family Story*, p. 222.

<sup>344</sup> Michael Anderson, 'The Social Position of Spinsters in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of Family History*, 9 (1984), 377-93 (p. 390).

<sup>345</sup> Warner, p. 116.

often became long-term companions and gained mutual support from their non-sexual relationships. They also gained greater personal autonomy by being no longer accountable for their behaviour to their extended families. The arrangement also provided mutual chaperonage, and was therefore considered more respectable for women than living alone.

These relationships offer a more positive view of women's living conditions in the period. One woman, Laura Painter from Bath, recalls her years spent living with another woman as a time of friendship and support. Born in 1913, Painter was left on her own in the mid-1930s after the death of her mother and sister. Nina, her friend and neighbour, another woman who had never married, came to the house each evening to keep her company. One evening she said to Laura, 'I don't want to go home', to which Laura replied, 'I've got a spare room', and the two women decided that living together would be a solution that would give them both company and the advantages of shared resources. Laura was glad because it meant she could keep the house, 'I don't know how I'd have managed in a bed sitting-room'. Unfortunately, Nina was twelve years older than Laura and died first, which was a great loss to Laura after so many years together.<sup>346</sup>

In Winifred Holtby's novel *The Crowded Street* (1924), the heroine Muriel Hammond has been kept at home by her mother in anticipation of a future marriage that seems increasingly unlikely as she gets older. The vicar's daughter, Delia Vaughan, rescues Muriel from her suffocating home life by asking her 'to come and share my flat and work during the day in the office of the Twentieth Century Reform League', thus providing her with both an alternative home and an occupation. Muriel accepts her offer and takes up the role of looking after Delia; 'She organized the little household' with what Delia refers to as her 'domestic instinct'.<sup>347</sup> Also published in 1924, Radclyffe

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<sup>346</sup> Laura Painter, Personal conversation with the author, 21 January 2009.

<sup>347</sup> Winifred Holtby, *The Crowded Street* (1924; repr. London: Virago, 1981), pp. 237, 242, 244.

Hall's novel, *The Unlit Lamp*, depicts the thwarted love between Joan Ogden and her former governess Elizabeth Rodney. Joan stays for a fortnight in Elizabeth's Bloomsbury flat, but even though Joan thinks of Elizabeth as 'the perfect companion', she is ultimately unable to leave her mother and make the arrangement permanent.<sup>348</sup> Thus, the lesbian desire between the two women can never be fully realised.

In *The Crowded Street* the two women are friends, rather than lovers, but their relationship may still have been subject to scrutiny. Lillian Faderman's research into romantic friendships and lesbian love between women argues that after the Great War 'openly expressed love between women ceased to be possible' as the new medical knowledge of the sexologists had 'cast such affection in a new light'.<sup>349</sup> Krafft-Ebing and Ellis were the first to name and classify same sex love as 'sexual inversion'. In *Psychopathia Sexualis* first published in 1886, Krafft-Ebing argued that 'in sexual inversion we must look for the cause in central (cerebral) defects'.<sup>350</sup> This was expanded on by Ellis in 'Sexual Inversion', originally the first volume of his multi-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* published in 1896, where he further elaborated on his use of the terms 'sexual inversion' and 'homosexuality':

The first is used more especially to indicate that the sexual impulse is organically and innately turned toward individuals of the same sex. The second is used more comprehensively of the general phenomena of sexual attraction between persons of the same sex, even if only of a slight and temporary character.<sup>351</sup>

Although Ellis agreed with Krafft-Ebing that true inversion is congenital, he argued that there was another form that can be 'temporary' and caused by the seduction of a more experienced person or as the result of disappointment in normal love. Ellis and Krafft-Ebing also agreed that sexual inversion is harder to detect in women. Ellis argued that this is because 'we are accustomed to a much greater familiarity and intimacy between

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<sup>348</sup> Radclyffe Hall, *The Unlit Lamp* (1924; repr. London: Virago, 1981), p. 202.

<sup>349</sup> Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love Between Women From the Renaissance to the Present* (London: The Women's Press, 1985), p. 20.

<sup>350</sup> Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, p. 229.

<sup>351</sup> Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 4 vols (New York: Random House, 1936), vol. II, p. 4.

women than between men, and we are less apt to suspect the existence of any abnormal passion'. By drawing attention to the concept of female sexual inversion, Ellis ensured that many women's relationships were looked at with suspicion and would be newly labelled as 'abnormal passion'. Particularly as Ellis used such broad definitions to describe the invert, which included such prosaic things as 'a more or less distinct trace of masculinity' and 'a dislike and sometimes incapacity for needle-work and other domestic occupations'.<sup>352</sup>

The definitions of the sexologists became mapped onto the image of The New Woman, who in the press was frequently caricatured as exhibiting extremes of feminine and unfeminine behaviour, being 'mannish' in appearance. Sally Ledger has highlighted how she was also conflated with the image of the vampire and perceived as a sexual predator.<sup>353</sup> This emphasises the largely mythological representation of the unmarried woman and how the imagery of respectable feminine behaviour was overlaid onto the figure of the spinster: her unmarried status assumed her celibacy, and any sexual desire would thus be labelled deviant. These descriptors continued to be applied to unmarried women and by the nineteen thirties had been adopted to define the 'mannish lesbian', who began to appear in journalism and literature.<sup>354</sup> In interwar France, women's liberation from domestic roles was similarly confined to the two extremes, with unmarried women characterised as either 'femmes fatales or androgynes'.<sup>355</sup>

In *The Weather in the Streets*, Lehmann introduces a series of character traits that readers of Krafft-Ebing and Ellis would have come to associate with the 'invert' or homosexual. Olivia is assessed in terms of her masculine appearance: 'Mary ran an eye

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<sup>352</sup> Ellis, *Psychology of Sex*, vol. II, pp. 322-3, 204, 222, 250

<sup>353</sup> See Ledger, pp. 100-6.

<sup>354</sup> Alison Oram, "'A Sudden Orgy of Decadance": Writing about Sex between Women in the Interwar Popular Press', in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and National Culture*, ed. by Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 165-80 (p. 176).

<sup>355</sup> Richard David Sonn, *Sex, Violence, and the Avant-Garde: Anarchism in Interwar France* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), p. 39.

over her. ... Ringless hands, flat hips and stomach' (WITS 94) and Marigold says to Olivia: 'How thin you are. Like a boy' (WITS 106). Marigold takes this further by asking Olivia if she knows any 'queer people [...] what d'you call 'em – Lesbians and things' (WITS 106). Marigold wants to know if they fall for Olivia because of her manliness. Although Olivia says she has never felt that way, Marigold provokes her with: "I bet if I were like that I'd make a pass at you". She patted and stroked Olivia's hip with a light clinging touch' (WITS 106). While this appears to be a blatant proposition, Olivia is not clear of Marigold's meaning and she defiantly states: 'But that's not why my marriage didn't work' (WITS 106). Although there is the suggestion that Olivia's mannish looks could indicate preponderance to inversion, Lehmann also demonstrates a desire for sexual experimentation that could cross the mind of a married woman. Marigold hopes that Olivia, with her manly appearance, will induct her into this unknown world and when she finds that is not the case she becomes 'bored' and 'indifferent' (WITS 107).

Lehmann had approached the subject of same-sex love previously in her first novel *Dusty Answer* (1927), which depicts the heroine Judith Earle falling in love with Jennifer Baird at college in Cambridge. Again Lehmann introduces terms from sexology and Freudian psychoanalysis as Jennifer refers to a fellow student Mabel Fuller as having 'sex-repression' and announces her own fear: 'I'm terrified of getting repressions'.<sup>356</sup> That Lehmann's work has been shaped by the new ideas and debates taking place about female sexuality was highlighted in a review of her second novel, *A Note in Music* (1930), which was not as well received as *Dusty Answer* and suggested Lehmann had drawn too heavily on the language of sexology: 'at one moment we are in the fantastic world of a Walter De La Mare tale, at the next Havelock Ellis has put the poet to flight'.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>356</sup> Rosamond Lehmann, *Dusty Answer* (1927; repr. London: Flamingo, 1996), pp. 117, 118.

<sup>357</sup> Marjorie Grant Cook, 'Book Review: A Note in Music', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 4 September 1930, p. 698.

Dorothy Richardson's heroine Miriam is also aligned with masculine tendencies in the *Pilgrimage* series. Alongside her smoking and bicycle riding there are repeated references to her large hands, with the 'thumb-joint of a man', that 'came between her and the world of women' (I, 283). In contrast to Miriam, her friend Amabel is given overtly feminine characteristics, and 'smallish womanish hands' (IV 187). Miriam meets the young French woman at a London women's club in *Dawn's Left Hand* (1931), the tenth book in the series. Amabel takes a room in Mrs Bailey's boarding house in order to be close to her new friend and the two women fall in love. Although their relationship is never explicitly sexual, there is clearly an intense emotional and intellectual connection as they 'were both filled with the same longing, to get away and lie side by side in the darkness describing and talking it all over until sleep should come' (IV 243). However, Miriam ends the relationship by instigating Amabel's marriage to Michael Shatov, her own previous lover. Joanne Winning has suggested that Miriam's decision to end the relationship 'is figured through her inability to sustain its intimacy'.<sup>358</sup> In the twelfth book *Dimple Hill* (1938) before her wedding to Michael, Amabel suggests that Miriam run away with her. Although Miriam thinks that if they were to do so it would be 'Completeness of being [...] in a way no man and woman be they never so well mated, can ever have' (IV, 545), she refuses Amabel's offer, choosing a life of solitude and creativity instead.

Because the terminology coined by the sexologists was the only one available for writers in the interwar period to describe these new categories of feeling, it became employed in texts both by those who wanted to offer a more positive representation of love between women as well as those using the terms pejoratively. Alison Oram has described this 'democratization of specialist understanding' as one of the defining

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<sup>358</sup> Joanne Winning, *The Pilgrimage of Dorothy Richardson* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p. 128.

features of sexual modernity.<sup>359</sup> Radclyffe Hall's novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), draws extensively on the language of the sexologists, calling for inverts to be tolerated by society, while simultaneously suggesting there was also perhaps something deviant about them. Laura Doan argues convincingly that Hall was a vigorous proponent of 'conventional constructions of femininity and traditional domesticity' and that she hid her lesbianism behind a facade of feminine respectability, outlining in interviews how much she loved cleaning the house.<sup>360</sup>

Perceptions of women's relationships changed in the interwar period and several novels offered alternative visions of women's sexuality, such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, which was also published in 1928. However, there are few positive images of women's same-sex relationships. Those that do exist, such as Lehmann's *Dusty Answer*, are often framed by the conventions of heterosexual marriage that take precedence as the primary relationship, or in the case of Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, they end with the central character destined to a life of loneliness.

### **3.5 Sexual Encounters in the Boarding House: Catherine Thackray's Autobiographical Account**

The fluidity between public and private space in the boarding house enables encounters to take place in a transitory setting that could not take place within the permanence of the home. This is problematic in relation to the boarding house where the sexualised space often co-exists with the family space. Boarding houses were often run by widows or married women struggling to provide for their families if their husbands were ill or not working. The family home, and the space it offered, was a saleable asset and enabled women to provide for their children without having to sell it or take other employment.

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<sup>359</sup> Oram, p. 166.

<sup>360</sup> Laura Doan, "'Woman's Place Is the Home': Conservative Sapphic Modernity' in *Sapphic Modernities*, pp. 91-107, (pp. 96-7).

For the woman running a boarding house with young daughters, aware of the shortage of eligible bachelors, there was the anticipation of marriage proposals. There was also the advantage that the relationship could be supervised as it was under the family roof. In *The Tunnel* (1919), the fourth book in Richardson's *Pilgrimage* series, Miriam Henderson's landlady Mrs Bailey explains to Miriam that changing her house from a lodging to a boarding house will be better for her children: 'It'll give my chicks a better chance. It isn't fair on them – living in the kitchen and seeing nobody' (II, 286). Later in the conversation her true plans emerge: 'I feel I must do something for the children. Mrs Reynolds has married three of her daughters to boarders' (II, 287). This economic advantage also translates as a better class of resident boarder, paying more for the privileges of meals and a communal sitting room. By moving her daughters into the communal spaces of the home, rather than hiding them away in the kitchen, they become visible to the boarders and the chances of an affluent match are increased. Underlying this is the suggestion that the daughters are somehow paraded as sexual goods for the male boarders.

This can also be seen in James Joyce's short story 'The Boarding House' published in *Dubliners* in 1914, which provides an early literary example of the boarding house as sexualised space and family home. Mrs Mooney separates from her drunken husband and sets up a boarding house to provide for her and the children: 'She governed her house cunningly and firmly, knew when to give credit, when to be stern and when to let things pass. All the resident young men spoke of her as *The Madam*'.<sup>361</sup> By using the term 'madam' Joyce makes implicit the connection with brothel ownership, and this is highlighted in the presentation of Mrs Mooney's only daughter Polly: 'a slim girl of nineteen; she had light soft hair and a small full mouth', who on music nights on a Sunday would sing:

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<sup>361</sup> James Joyce, *Dubliners* (1914; repr. London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 56-7.

I'm a . . . naughty girl.  
 You needn't sham:  
 You know I am.<sup>362</sup>

Joyce does not conceal Mrs Mooney's plans to allow her daughter free circulation among the young men in the boarding house: 'As Polly was very lively the intention was to give her the run of the young men. Besides, young men like to feel that there is a young woman not very far away'.<sup>363</sup> Julieann Veronica Ulin has pointed out the 'commercial and commodified' nature of the domestic space of the boarding house, and how in Joyce's story the conflation of the landlady with the brothel keeper causes anxiety 'since both women profit from a space in which they are supposed to be contained and kept pure'.<sup>364</sup> Far from being kept pure Mrs Mooney directly encourages her daughter to provoke a liaison with her male boarders. Once Polly has become involved with a boarder, Mr Doran, Joyce depicts Mrs Mooney watching carefully before she makes her move as 'an outraged mother', forcing Mr Doran into the 'one reparation [that] could make up for the loss of her daughter's honour: marriage'.<sup>365</sup> Rather than a single payment for her daughter's purity, Joyce shows Mrs Mooney wanting to extract long-term economic security.

Davidoff has noted that there was often scope for gossip surrounding men living in a woman's home as boarders or lodgers: 'There was a feeling that the lodger has access to all sorts of hidden extra privileges through his special relationship to his landlady (and / or her servant and daughter)'.<sup>366</sup> However, there is little historical documentation that would give an indication of the prevalence of sexual encounters in the boarding house, or the extent to which relationships within that space evolved naturally or were engineered. The Women's Library Archive in London provides us with some alternative subjective

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<sup>362</sup> Joyce, p. 57

<sup>363</sup> Joyce, p. 57-8.

<sup>364</sup> Julieann Veronica Ulin, 'Fluid Boarders and Naughty Girls: Music, Domesticity, and Nation in Joyce's Boarding Houses', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 44 (2007), 263-89, (pp. 267, 270).

<sup>365</sup> Joyce, p. 60.

<sup>366</sup> Davidoff, 'Separation of Home and Work', p. 91.

sources through women's unpublished autobiographies and letters that can illuminate the boarding house experience. One particularly useful insight into the sexual transgressions of the boarding house can be found in the unpublished autobiography of Catherine Thackray, who records growing up with her seven siblings in her mother's Cambridge boarding house. There is no indication in the document of how old Thackray was when she began to compile her autobiography, but it is clearly written from the perspective of an adult nearing the end of her life and looking back from some distance. It has a sense of what Carolyn Steedman describes as the 'completeness' of the autobiography, 'the teller, in the here and now, saying: that's how it was; or, that's how I believe it to have been'.<sup>367</sup> This is illustrative of the ability of autobiography to both reveal and conceal simultaneously. In telling a life story, it is always the version that the author wants the reader to believe.

Thackray was born in 1922 and was entering puberty in the nineteen thirties. Her mother had a teaching job as well as running the boarding house and it becomes apparent that economic necessity has driven the mother to convert the family home following her husband's mental breakdown. Thackray recalls of her father, 'it became accepted by all of us that he didn't work, not just at paid employment but in any way in the house'.<sup>368</sup> Her mother's busy workload and her father's withdrawal result in a lack of attention for Thackray and her siblings: 'One parent always teaching, one parent in bed [...] both apparently oblivious of – or helpless to deal with – our needs' (CT 26).

The entry of strangers into the home shatters notions of private domesticity and instead of the family home being a place to confine the sexuality of a growing girl, Thackray recounts how the house became sexualised by the inhabitants: 'Sexuality was in

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<sup>367</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1992), p. 48.

<sup>368</sup> Catherine Thackray, *Ta in her own words. Reminiscences and Observations*, Compiled posthumously by Becca (Rebecca Thackray), Ref: 7CTH/1, Archive and Museum Collection, The Women's Library, London, p. 10. Subsequent references to this document will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with CT.

the air in our house. Here we were full-blooded teenagers, the house chock-a-block with young foreigners of both sexes over here to have a good time' (CT 26). The physical enclosure of the house as well as the porosity between the rooms is emphasised as the inhabitants live in the same building but, as no segregation is enforced, move freely within. Like the landladies Miss Padsoe and Miss Baker in Gibbons's novel *Bassett*, Thackray's mother chose to take primarily foreign male boarders 'most of them French and South African boys' who were studying at the university (CT 22).

From the first section, 'Memories of Childhood', Thackray begins to sexualise her life. She remembers her fascination with the 'Blue Man', a young boy in a boiler suit who was working outside the house. Thackray was only four at the time and her sister Alison six, but she recalls: 'he must have teased us because I am left with a sense of flirtatiousness'. She also recalls a teenage cousin coming to stay: 'I sat on his leg and he jogged me up and down. Again there remains a sense of flirtatiousness' (CT 3). Thackray depicts herself as a sexualised being, a child-woman, from the start of the narrative. It could be argued that the memories she has have been overlaid with an adult view of a 'sense of flirtatiousness', but as the narrative progresses it seems that Thackray has been forced into an early sexualisation:

Against this background I had what I now feel were some appalling sexual encounters, which I suspect are far more common than is generally acknowledged. I certainly did not enjoy any of them and yet each left me with a deep sense of guilt and no doubt there must have been an element of desire on my part or I would have prevented them from happening (CT 25).

Perhaps this is why Thackray has sexualised her childhood history so much; she is writing back into the narrative that 'element of desire' that she is convinced must have been there. There is also, perhaps, the later knowledge of Freud's theories on the sexuality of children. The text is haunted by these early sexual encounters, other episodes to which Thackray refers include one when she is aged twelve and a 'young French boy invited me up to his room. I felt flattered. After a quick grope he soon abandoned me' (CT 22).

These incidents lead to an account of the sexual abuse from her brother Andrew when she was thirteen and he was seventeen. The abuse is referred to twice in the text; in the first Thackray is reading a book on her bed when Andrew who was reading a book on another bed came over to join her. She was surprised when he put his arm around her: ‘We were an undemonstrative family so this in itself was unusual and when he followed by kissing me I was puzzled. Later he made an assignation to meet me in the bathroom and went much further’ (CT 22). The situation continued for ‘some miserable weeks and months [...] And then one evening I just refused’ (CT 22). Several pages later she refers to this first incident with Andrew again, but this time she elaborates:

I was surprised to find him kissing me – something that went beyond a peck on the cheek from my mother I had not experienced. Again I was pleased at this proof that I was likeable and do not remember objecting when intercourse occurred. For the next few months I was haunted by Andrew’s demands for further intercourse and my apparent inability to break the situation (CT 25-26).

In most of her autobiography Thackray does not make use of hindsight to provide any authorial glosses, but in the case of Andrew she does: ‘I feel very strongly indeed that no sexually abused child should be cross-questioned and made to reveal incidents which could lead to being responsible for sending someone to prison. It must be pure hell’ (CT 22). Thackray even takes some of the responsibility for Andrew’s advances: ‘I could have saved us both so much if only I had been strong and tough to start with’ (CT 22). Thackray’s desire to save ‘both’ herself and her brother, suggests that she felt herself responsible for not being ‘strong and tough’ enough to prevent him from the start. Thackray feels that she has in some way provoked her brother’s advances, subconsciously feeling she must therefore have been a sexual child in order to sexually arouse him. These feelings come out clearly in her autobiography in which she searches her past for evidence to correlate her image of herself as a sexualised child-woman.

In 1936 when Thackray is fourteen a thirty-year-old artist called John Downton comes to live in the house. This time her mother is aware of the developing relationship

because she has engineered their acquaintance, wanting Downton to paint her daughter: ‘My mother got very excited about it and somehow made me feel self-conscious’ (CT 22). Thackray describes it as ‘an odd relationship. No sort of sex whatsoever’ (CT 22). It seems disturbing that a fourteen year old would interpret a relationship without sexual intercourse as ‘odd’ until it is recalled what took place between her and her brother. The relationship is brought to an end when her mother discovers her daughter in Downton’s room:

mother came to his door and found it locked. We were completely innocent but my mother created a scene [...] It ended by John Downton giving notice but not, according to my mother, before he had declared that he would “marry me tomorrow” if I were old enough (CT 23).

All the children in the house were ‘exposed’ by their parents’ lack of attention and a house full of young men. The sexualised atmosphere of the house is something that Thackray feels had a direct impact on the younger children, she writes, ‘most directly affected were Andrew, Alison and me’ (CT 26). But the older children were also affected. Her older brother David focused on his studies ‘though no doubt very aware of the atmosphere – only in recent years has he managed to express in words some of the appalling damage he feels was done to him in those years’ (CT 26). Thackray’s account provides a new perspective on the boarding house as a space of fear, unlike the conventional associations of the home as a place of comfort and security; the porosity of the space between the boarders and the family means that a closed door provides no sense of either personal space or safety.

What also comes across vividly in this account is the children in the family being simultaneously a financial burden and a form of unpaid help. Steedman, who has written an autobiography, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, of her own working class childhood growing up in London in the nineteen fifties, recalls recognising in Kathleen Woodward’s *Jipping Street* that working class children were expected ‘to accept the impossible

contradiction of being both desired and being a burden; and not to complain'. Woodward's own account is based on her childhood in London before the Great War and both autobiographies have a strong sense of the 'daughter's silence' expected on this matter.<sup>369</sup>

In Thackray's case not only are the eight children a financial burden, but they are also a spatial one. They take up too much room in a house where space equals money. The money that can be made from boarders takes priority over the children of the family. Catherine and her sister Alison are moved out:

During that summer of 1937 my mother's desire to make ever more money from boarders exceed the amount of space our large house could offer. [...] Because of the numbers my mother hired a bedroom in a small house further along the road. It was a dreary back bedroom in which Alison and I shared a double bed. I disliked turning out of 152 late at night, unlocking an alien front door and entering what appeared to be a lifeless house (CT 30).

The physical movement of Thackray and her sister to the back bedroom 'further along the road' marks a significant spatial shift that takes them out of the family home and into someone else's home, from daughter of the house to boarder.

If Thackray's account is to be read as a history, it can only be read as one person's history and it is not evidence of widespread early sexual encounters or abuse in boarding house life. However, there are other accounts that express similar stories. Peter Vaughan's mother owned a boarding house in the nineteen thirties and Peter describes how when there were too many guests 'people quite often slept together in double beds or on bedsettees'. Peter recalls that as he

grew into puberty, sometimes this was a potentially exciting situation. On one occasion I remember being directed to sleep with an older woman, about twenty-five years old. It was a narrow, single bed and the experience was warm and kindly.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 17.

<sup>370</sup> *Female Sexual Abuse of Children: The Ultimate Taboo*, ed. by Michele Elliott (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 183.

This account emphasises that when space was limited it became an economic necessity to fit as many paying guests as possible into the house. Houses were converted into boarding houses at times of family hardship and the family would come to depend on that money. Another daughter of a landlady, Marion Johnson, remembers when her father lost his money in the late nineteen twenties her mother had to transform the family home into a boarding house of paying guests in order to survive financially and provide for her three children. Johnson remembers that she and her two sisters would do all the household chores to save money on servants.<sup>371</sup> For those inhabiting the boarding house it was an escape from domestic expectations, but for those running it, the domestic life was ongoing. Thackray's mother has a girl to help with domestic work and one to do the cooking, but Thackray's memories are still that her 'mother had no break from domesticity' (CT 4).

These accounts of life in boarding houses provide a broader insight into the economic aspects of the boarding house and just how unstable the space was, for both the family who live there as well as those paying to board. For those living as paying boarders, these spaces could often provide freedom and autonomy from the family home. This is particularly so if living with a friend, as without a landlady to take the place of the absent family there was greater choice in individual behaviour. There was the perception that boarding houses and hotels were spaces of sexual freedom, but for women this was rarely the case. Women continued to be unequal in relationships with men where a double standard on sexual morality was always in operation. These texts highlight that the only socially acceptable way of accommodating women's sexuality continued to be within the family house.

In contrast to remaining single, the alternative relationships of the mistress and the amateur were not necessarily portrayed in fiction as empowering alternatives, but they do,

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<sup>371</sup> Harrison, 'Interview with Mrs Marion Johnson'.

nevertheless, provide an important social commentary. These narratives raise many issues about the limited choices available to women for sexual autonomy, and highlight the economic aspects of sexual relationships outside marriage. Much has been written about the apparent lack of political engagement of female writers in the 1930s, but by depicting alternative perspectives of women's experience of home and domestic life, the work of these writers can be read as a call for an acknowledgement of other ways of living. The everyday experience of relationships is rarely explored in historical accounts and fictional narratives of alternative relationships, and alternative living spaces, fill a gap that has remained largely undocumented in women's histories.

## Chapter 4

### Race and Nationality in the Boarding House

‘With the help of a guide-book and many maps we learned the names of the principal streets, and gradually began to find our way about.’

Jean Batten, *My Life*<sup>372</sup>

‘A map can tell me how to find a place I have not seen but have often imagined. When I get there, following the map faithfully, the place is not the place of my imagination.’

Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*<sup>373</sup>

Having explored in previous chapters the meanings of the boarding house for British unmarried women, this final chapter examines the significance of this space for non-British single women travelling to Britain in the 1930s as brief visitors, long-term travellers, students, and fortune seekers. Placing the boarding house within the wider context of community and nation, this chapter will consider the symbolic meaning placed on both the boarding house and its female inhabitants.

From the late-eighteenth century until after the Second World War the British empire exerted a powerful global influence that reached a peak in the late Victorian period. The empire enabled a far-reaching dissemination of British culture and language and also shaped conceptions of British national identity. Elleke Boehmer has argued that ‘metropolitan writing – Dicken’s novels, for example, or Trollope’s travelogues – participated in organising and reinforcing perceptions of Britain as a dominant world power’, and travellers were drawn from across the globe to the country they had read and heard so much about.<sup>374</sup>

The autobiographies, travelogues, and novels produced by visitors to Britain frequently related how the ‘London’ and ‘England’ they had imagined from their distant homelands was then re-imagined upon arrival. The ‘typical English boarding house’ was

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<sup>372</sup> Jean Batten, *My Life* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd, 1938), p. 24.

<sup>373</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 1990), p.81.

<sup>374</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2.

a frequent reference in many texts, turning the boarding house into a cultural artefact epitomising what was seen as both ‘typical’ and ‘English’. As the film historian Janet Staiger reminds us, ‘cultural artefacts are not containers with immanent meanings’, each meaning is dependent on the constructed identity of the interpreter, their gender, class, race and nationality.<sup>375</sup> This chapter examines the formation of the mythologised boarding house by women with very different relationships to Britain and the British empire in order to understand how these representations might be simultaneously reinforced and challenged by their encounters with the materiality of actual boarding houses. Using Benedict Anderson’s concept of ‘imagined communities’ standing in for nations, I explore how the boarding house can be positioned as a microcosm of urban modernity and how negotiations between boarders of different nationalities can provide an insight into the ways invisible boundaries are created within shared space.<sup>376</sup>

The first category of travellers examined is white women from North America and the colonies (particularly Australia and New Zealand). Although viewed as ‘foreign’ their skin colour did not make them visibly different. The second group of travellers, black women from India, Africa and the Caribbean, formed a more visible minority in interwar Britain which, even in the urban centres, was predominantly white.

The male Indian student and his relationship with his white landlady and her daughter became a popular topic for novels by Anglo-Indian writers in the interwar period. Anglo-Indian representations of English boarding house life, and the dual complexities of race and class engendered by mixed race relationships will be discussed in the third section. The final section of this chapter examines the boarding house as a melting pot of nationalities for those newly arrived in Britain and suggests that the boarding house can be read as a way of containing the outsider or ‘other’.

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<sup>375</sup> Janet Staiger, *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. xi.

<sup>376</sup> See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

#### 4.1 'A Boarding-House in Bloomsbury': Imagined Communities and the Boarding House of the Imagination

In her book on Australian women in London, Angela Woollacott has argued that 'a feminized world of boarding houses' emerged in the early twentieth century enabling white colonials to be independent while remaining 'within the bounds of respectability'.<sup>377</sup> Single women travellers from the colonies and America had been arriving in Britain in greater numbers since the 1870s, when transatlantic travel became more affordable. Census data from 1931 recorded high numbers of women living in Britain who were born in the dominions and colonies, including: Canada (16,692), Australia (15,707), South Africa (13,040), New Zealand (4,642) and the West Indies (4,294). By 1931 there were also 21,024 women born in the United States who were resident in Britain.<sup>378</sup>

Although the Census data did not record the women's marital status, it did give the numbers of men for comparison purposes and confirmed there were greater numbers of women than men from the majority of colonies, with the exception of the West Indies and the groups labelled 'other colonies in Asia' and 'colonies in Africa'. The Census showed nine per cent more women than men from Canada, rising to around twenty per cent more women from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa.<sup>379</sup> These women came in search of work, attracted by new employment opportunities in London. The city also appealed to many established as well as aspiring artists and writers from the British colonies and North America.

By the turn of the century these new travellers were becoming part of the literary mythology of London through a genre of supposedly autobiographical, but largely

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<sup>377</sup> Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 68. Woollacott acknowledges the current 'dearth of scholarly work on lodging houses and their meanings for women', but it is not the main focus of her study, so she does not explore this 'feminized world' in detail, p. 237.

<sup>378</sup> *Census Of England and Wales: 1931 General Report*, p. 179.

<sup>379</sup> *Census Of England and Wales: 1931 General Report*, p. 179.

fictionalised, travelogues and novels with titles such as Sara Jeannette Duncan's *An American Girl in London* (1891) and Louise Mack's *An Australian Girl in London* (1902). The Australian Margaret Gilruth worked her way to London in 1931 as a steward on a Norwegian freighter and published her experiences as *Maiden Voyage: The Unusual Experiences of a Girl on Board a Tramp Ship* (1934). The American writer Blanche McManus appears unusual in choosing to call herself a 'woman' rather than adopting the self-descriptor 'girl' in the title of her work *An American Woman Abroad* (1911), perhaps to suggest a more mature and experienced narrator. Although the titles were similar, the representations of the English boarding house world they encountered contain subtle differences.

Woollacott has suggested that the communities formed within the boarding house were largely positive and mutually supportive.<sup>380</sup> While this would certainly be the case for some women, I argue that this descriptor supports a romanticised image of the boarding house and the cultural and social detachment experienced by residing in isolated geographical enclaves with other 'foreign' inhabitants has been largely ignored. As Jane S. Gabin has pointed out in relation to American women, 'Simply being Americans in London simultaneously did not impel these women to feel that they belonged to one large sorority'.<sup>381</sup> While the world of the London boarding house could indeed be a place of freedom, both physically and intellectually, for the unmarried female traveller, it could also be a lonely experience.

In order to consider the wider relationship of imagined homes, communities and nations to accommodation I want to broaden out the timeframe of the thesis slightly here, to show how the boarding house image developed from travel accounts at the turn of the century and remained firmly established in the interwar period.

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<sup>380</sup> Woollacott, pp. 68-9.

<sup>381</sup> Jane S. Gabin, *American Women in Gilded Age London: Expatriates Rediscovered* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006), p. 3.

Despite the changes in Britain's position as a colonial power after the Great War, the inhabitants of Britain's colonies continued to be fed images of Britain's greatness and encouraged to think of themselves as British. Benedict Anderson has argued in his influential work *Imagined Communities* that a nation is an 'imagined political community'. That is, a social construction to which the populace imagine they belong:

It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.<sup>382</sup>

These imagined communities were part of a wider colonial project, created for political benefit to instil loyalty to the nation. In 1921 the Earl of Meath contributed an article to a collection *London of the Future* by The London Society on 'London as the Heart of the Empire', where he advocated that in improving the appearance of London 'we should desire to make London a real home for the children of the Empire – a home to which they all may desire to return'.<sup>383</sup> Meath's vision is clearly gendered: his imaginary London is presented as the domestic and maternal heartland of the empire. The gendering of the nation state is something that the work of Boehmer has been significant in bringing to critical attention. Boehmer has argued that in relation to nation building, 'gender has been, to date, habitual and apparently intrinsic to national imagining'. In a discussion of representations of postcolonial nations, Boehmer draws attention to the ways in which 'The nation as a body of people was imagined as a family arrangement in which the leaders had the authority of fathers and, in relation to the maternal national entity, adopted the position of sons'.<sup>384</sup> The article by the Earl of Meath draws on a similar paternal idea of the family to construct an imaginary London for the 'children of the Empire'.

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<sup>382</sup> Anderson, p. 6.

<sup>383</sup> The Earl of Meath, 'London as the Heart of Empire', in *London of the Future* by The London Society, ed. by Sir Aston Webb (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1921), pp. 251-60 (p. 258).

<sup>384</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 5, 34.

Anderson's concept of imagined communities points to how the myths of a nation are created and sustained through representations and how 'fiction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations'.<sup>385</sup> The idea of nation as fiction can be seen in the accounts written by women travelling from the colonies to London for the first time, many of whom continued to hold an imaginary country in their minds.

The literary aura of a Bloomsbury room attracted the Australian Nancy Phelan, who came to London in the late thirties enchanted by the thought that, 'Handal had lived round the corner, Shelley down the road, Virginia Woolf up the street and Katherine Mansfield almost next door'.<sup>386</sup> The New Zealand pilot Jean Batten first travelled to England in early 1929 fully aware of the English heritage she carried, for she had been sent to a boarding school in New Zealand where the English headmistress 'endeavoured to instil the English traditions in her pupils'.<sup>387</sup> Growing up with English traditions thousands of miles from England imparted a sense of England as home in many travellers before their arrival. The New Zealand writer Robin Hyde commented in her book *Dragon Rampant* (1939) that although she had only recently arrived in the country she 'had spent a good many imaginary years in England'.<sup>388</sup> Marjorie Seton-Williams, an Australian student, spent time studying in London from 1934 to 1935. In her autobiography, written in 1988, Seton-Williams described her initial impressions of London as like re-encountering a place from childhood, 'I lost my heart to London. It did not matter that I did not know my way about; the names of the streets and landmarks had

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<sup>385</sup> Anderson, p. 36.

<sup>386</sup> Nancy Phelan, *The Swift Foot of Time: An Australian in England, 1938-45* (Melbourne: Quartet Books, 1983), p. 13.

<sup>387</sup> Batten, p. 21.

<sup>388</sup> Robin Hyde, *Dragon Rampant* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1939), p. 17.

been familiar to me since childhood and I felt I had come home. This feeling has never left me each time I have come back'.<sup>389</sup>

New arrivals to London would frequently gravitate to Bloomsbury, drawn by the magnetic pull of the British Museum and the proliferation of hotels and boarding houses; according to *Fodor's Travel Guide* for 1936, 'the real home of the English boarding-house is in Bloomsbury'.<sup>390</sup> In the memoir of her travels unaccompanied through Europe in 1927, *Seventh Heaven* (1930), the Australian Nina Murdoch recalled 'the curious mixture of gentility, poverty, bohemianism, and culture that is Bloomsbury'.<sup>391</sup> She described the Bloomsbury accommodation as a mixture of 'flats for the young "intelligentsia" and of quiet hotels and boarding-houses for students and "Colonials" of whom a very great number I think were Americans'.<sup>392</sup> Gabin has recently documented how, at the end of the nineteenth century, a market emerged for the arrangement of marriages between titled British men of reduced circumstances and affluent American women, who would share their money in return for a title.<sup>393</sup>

Describing the process of visiting Europe from America, Blanche McManus wrote in *The American Woman Abroad* (1911):

Usually the lone woman traveller comes by way of England, where she can talk in a language approximating her own. Her destination is usually a boarding house in Bloomsbury or Kensington. Around Bloomsbury, with the British Museum as a nucleus, has sprung up, in the last fifteen years, a rank and file of boarding houses which are filled from May to September with unattached American women, and a few scattering, subdued men.<sup>394</sup>

Viewed as the geographical centre, Bloomsbury was both a location and a way of locating fellow nationals who had travelled to Britain. In her fictionalised account *An American*

<sup>389</sup> M. V. Seton-Williams, *The Road to El-Aguzain* (London: Kegan Paul, 1988), p. 21.

<sup>390</sup> *1936 on the Continent: The Entertaining Travel Annual*, ed. by Eugene Foder (1936; repr. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p. 1026.

<sup>391</sup> Nina Murdoch, *Seventh Heaven: A Joyous Discovery of Europe* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson Ltd, 1930), p. 183.

<sup>392</sup> Murdoch, p. 173.

<sup>393</sup> Gabin, p. 7.

<sup>394</sup> Blanche McManus, *The American Woman Abroad* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911), pp. 137-8.

*Girl in London* (1891), the Canadian-born writer Sara Jeannette Duncan describes the search for accommodation of her heroine Marmie Wick from Chicago. Scanning the ‘Board and Lodging’ column of the *Morning Post*, Duncan describes Marmie’s misguided geographic considerations:

My choice was narrowed considerably by so many of the addresses being other places than London, which I thought very peculiar in a London newspaper. Having come to see London, I did not want to live in Putney, or Brixton, or Chelsea, or Maida Vale. [...] I intended to content myself with the capital. So I picked out two or three places near the British Museum – I should be sure, I thought, to want to spend a great deal of time there.<sup>395</sup>

Duncan’s narrative was aimed at the British reader who would appreciate the nuances of her descriptions. Her light-hearted approach also allowed her to reflect back to her English readers their prejudices and misconceptions of ‘American girls’ as a group. The novel gained its humour from the author’s ability to be both an insider and outsider simultaneously: to portray an American’s perspective on Britain, while having the subtlety of an insider’s understanding, thus maximising the comic effect of her character’s misunderstandings. This was a device also employed by Louise Closser Hale in her novel *An American’s London* (1920), where her character expresses her horror when her landlady tells her there is ‘a geezer’ in the bath: ‘I knew my cockney, “an old geezer” was a frivolous elderly man’. Hale draws out her character’s confusion over two separate scenes before revealing her relief at the discovery of the ‘geyser’.<sup>396</sup>

Bloomsbury was also the destination for Louise Mack’s protagonist, Sylvia Leighton, in the fictionalised travelogue *An Australian Girl in London* (1902). Mack offers her readers two representations of the London boarding house: first, the negative one she assumes they currently hold: ‘When you think of a London boarding-house you see a landlady in curl papers and asphyxiate yourself in the odour of onions as you enter’; and second, the utopian one that she provides as a replacement: ‘A Boarding-House in

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<sup>395</sup> Sara Jeannette Duncan, *An American Girl in London* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1891), p. 50.

<sup>396</sup> Louise Closser Hale, *An American’s London* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1920), p. 108.

Bloomsbury! To some people, no doubt, these words are provocative of horror and dismay. To us they mean freedom, life, novelty, fascination, everything that makes the days worth living. Bloomsbury!’<sup>397</sup>

Mack assures the reader that hers ‘is a typical London Boarding-House’ and, indeed, her emphasis is on the similarity of her boarding house to the others surrounding it: it is ‘just like every other in the row’. It also follows the same routines, ‘we have eggs and bacon and fish for breakfast every morning of our lives’ and ‘dine at seven’, echoing other descriptions of boarding house life in its central facts. The difference in her account to that of Duncan’s is the over-exuberant tone that Mack creates for Sylvia, who passionately declares: ‘I love my boarding-house’. This is explained in part by the expectations of her character, Sylvia has grown up imagining the British capital: ‘London! I see it every night. I have been there hundreds of times already’. Sylvia’s feelings about London are projected onto everything within it, including her accommodation, and even though her ‘little back room in Bloomsbury’ is only ‘big enough to turn around in, with care’, Sylvia is conscious of ‘living out a dream – the dream of every Australian girl’.<sup>398</sup>

Mack’s novel is composed of a series of fictional letters from Sylvia addressed to family and friends in Australia and it seems this audience is also whom Mack had in mind for her readership. Anderson has described the ‘visible invisibility’ of an author’s readers in forming a ‘nationally imagined community’ for the author to address.<sup>399</sup> Mack’s text appears self-consciously aware of the ‘visible invisibility’ of her imagined community of readers, and alert to maintaining the expected image of a happy life in Britain in order to avoid destroying ‘the dream of every Australian girl’.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> Louise Mack, *An Australian Girl in London* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1902), pp. 183, 176.

<sup>398</sup> Mack, pp. 175, 2, 172, 173, 174.

<sup>399</sup> Anderson, p. 44.

<sup>400</sup> Mack, p. 174.

Duncan's American protagonist provides a less effusive account of her experiences in London boarding houses, as she recounts the depressing similarity of the interior spaces:

the same little dark hall, with the same interminable stairs twisting over themselves out of it, and the smell of the same dinner accompanying us all the way up. [...] In every case the stair carpet went up two flights, and after that there was oilcloth, rather forgetful as to its original pattern, and much frayed as to its edges – and after that, nothing. Always pails and brushes on the landings – what there is it about pails and brushes that should make them such a feature of boarding-house landings I don't know, but they are.<sup>401</sup>

The touch of humour in Duncan's writing softens the reality she is describing. Duncan's portrait, with its reference to the olfactory assault of the 'smell of the same dinner', clearly mirrors the unwanted image of the boarding house with its 'odour of onions' that Mack is keen to refute. Architecturally the houses are identical, town houses of several storeys, with the verticality translating into the rising cheapness of the accommodation. Before the houses were converted into boarding houses, the attic rooms would have housed the servants, and this was still reflected in the cheap décor of the upper floors. Mack makes this part of the pleasure of boarding house living: 'The higher you get the cheaper you are, till you get to heaven at thirty shillings a week'. The journey on uncarpeted stairs is worth the fine vantage point 'up near a London sky' of her fifth floor window, and there is no mention by Mack's protagonist of a decline in the accommodation standards as one gets higher and cheaper.<sup>402</sup> This joy in attic living reflects the perspective of Richardson's heroine Miriam. Ascending to her attic room, Miriam notes the 'stair carpet' on the first flight of stairs, 'the threadbare linoleum' on the third flight and finally the 'bare stairs' leading to her own room, but still delights in her attic room 'under the sky' (II, 12).

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<sup>401</sup> Duncan, p. 51.

<sup>402</sup> Mack, pp. 175, 172.

Writers continued to comment on the poor quality of the stairwells and landings, but attic rooms maintained an aura of romance, perhaps derived from their association with artists and writers. Describing her stay in a Mayfair boarding house in 1927 Nina Murdoch wrote:

In Clarges Street, up three dark flights of malevolently dodging stairs I had a room with a great oak beam across its ceiling and windows that overlooked the turning chimney cocks, the leads and attic windows of Mayfair. It sounds depressing. But it was not so, though the sounds that floated up to it often affected me with a pleasing melancholy.<sup>403</sup>

In 1935 Paul Cohen-Portheim, a well-known travel writer, observed that in the interwar period Mayfair was ‘still a place for the rich’, but significantly it was now for ‘the rich of all nations and no matter what origin and ancestry’.<sup>404</sup> Murdoch’s finances did not allow her to remain in Mayfair, and she moved to Bloomsbury ‘where many of the more modestly wealthy Americans have rooms’. She described it as an ‘amusing contrast’, but certainly not the evocative setting she found Mayfair. In Bloomsbury the street outside intruded into her room, rather than floating in with a ‘pleasing melancholy’, and she described being woken in the night ‘sure that some dreadful crime was being committed outside my boarding-house’, only to discover a woman ‘performing musically and not being strangled’.<sup>405</sup>

The attic room offered an interesting perspective for women coming from outside Britain in representing both escape and exile. There was a sense of both literal and figurative detachment as it physically located the inhabitant in a separate space from the rest of the house, while giving them the feeling of freedom derived from their vantage point. Gabin has argued that the American women who arrived in Britain were in a unique position, ‘simultaneously on the inside and the outside, participating and observing, accommodating themselves to their environment – or making it change for

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<sup>403</sup> Murdoch, p. 172.

<sup>404</sup> Paul Cohen-Portheim, *The Spirit of London* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1935), p. 16.

<sup>405</sup> Murdoch, pp. 183, 184.

them'.<sup>406</sup> Although women from outside Britain were indeed able to remake the spaces they inhabited in positive ways, often by creating 'imagined communities' within the boarding house world, by doing so they also placed themselves on the outside looking in, never able to quite belong or identify with the spaces they inhabited.

Louise Mack's account of the idealised space of the attic room in Bloomsbury was a journalistic construction. Her own experience was very different and not coloured with the 'shimmering, sparkling, irrepressive, causeless happiness' that she ascribed to Sylvia.<sup>407</sup> As Woollacott has noted, Mack had a less idealised existence: 'she lived in penury, surviving the London winter without fires or gas, behind on her rent, eating so little that she lost weight'.<sup>408</sup> The authentic account would certainly have made a less appealing book for her Australian readers. Aside from her imagined audience, Mack's fictionalised boarding house may have been written as much to herself as her imaginary friends and family, for it allowed her to take refuge in the constructed images she had created, recalling Bachelard's argument that it is not the bricks and mortar structure of the house itself that is important, but the experience of mentally inhabiting an *image* of a house: 'He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams' (PS 5). The refusal to represent her experience resulted in Mack enhancing the standard features of a London boarding house - the cheap attic space, the smells - into a utopian ideal.

The need to continue to depict the idiosyncratic image of English boarding house life was perhaps borne out of the disillusionment experienced when the place that had been imagined from a distance failed to correspond to the reality. Mack wrote about the boarding house as a space of freedom when she herself was far from free. As Nina Murdoch had discovered, the Bloomsbury boarding house was also the place to which

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<sup>406</sup> Gabin, p. 5.

<sup>407</sup> Mack, p. 173.

<sup>408</sup> Woollacott, p. 50.

travellers move when the money begins to run low. For Mack it became a place of waiting for her book to be published and for the money that would enable her to continue living in London.

This anxious, hopeless, wait for the cheque in the post is a boarding house trope that appears frequently in literature, it has been seen in the fiction of Storm Jameson and Jean Rhys whose characters await cheques from their lovers. It also appeared in Katherine Mansfield's short story 'Pictures', first published in 1917. Miss Ada Moss lives in a single room, 'a Bloomsbury top-floor back' that 'smelled of soot and face powder and the paper of fried potatoes she had bought in for supper the night before'.<sup>409</sup> Her landlady brings in a letter for Ada that they both hope will contain a cheque for the rent. It is a rejection letter, but Ada pretends it is the offer of work. Her disbelieving landlady seizes the letter and threatens her with eviction if she does not have her rent by the evening.

### **Cultural Heritage and Community**

For those without the money to socialise in the more affluent circles, the metropolis did not necessarily foster the supportive community of expatriates that had been envisaged. The New Zealand writer Jane Mander made a frugal living as a writer and editor in interwar London and had a wide circle of acquaintances, but her compatriot Robin Hyde did not thrive on her new environment, and her ill health, depression and lack of money led her to commit suicide in her Kensington boarding house in 1939. Life in London was a solitary affair without a secure income, and women like Mack and Hyde remained in their boarding house rooms rather than frequenting the members' clubs that formed the core of white colonial social life in interwar London.<sup>410</sup> As Mack herself acknowledged

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<sup>409</sup> Katherine Mansfield, 'Pictures' in *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* by Katherine Mansfield (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 119-128 (p. 119).

<sup>410</sup> See Woollacott for a detailed discussion of associations and clubs for colonial women, pp. 96-103

towards the end of her narrative, there were distinctive gradients on the social scale that were determined by accommodation:

There are three grades of homelessness in London – Boarding-house, Apartments, Flat. If you live in Boarding-houses you cannot be known. If you live in Apartments you can go and see your friends. If you have a flat your friends can come and see you.<sup>411</sup>

There is very little mention in any of the accounts, either autobiographical or fictional, of making friends or acquaintances within the boarding house: the narratives seem to focus exclusively on the narrator and their relationship with the boarding house and, often by extension, their relationship to Britain. Feelings of isolation were exacerbated if the boarder felt in transit not only from one place to another, but also from one nation to another. There seem to be four potential ways of negotiating between two national and cultural identities: in the first the traveller feels a strong identification with the homeland and a feeling of displacement in England; in the second there is a rejection or detachment from the country of origin and a strong identification with the idea of ‘England’, and in the third there is a simultaneous identification with both places as home, for example, for many Australians and New Zealanders who had grown-up surrounded by images of Britain, this imaginary nation had been appropriated for their own alongside the home country. The fourth position is one of being at home nowhere and having no country of belonging. These are not categories with fixed boundaries; identity is always fluid and something that can be constructed and contested in different ways at different times, and there is always the possibility of movement between and across these positions.

In her diary entry for 2 March 1935, Robin Hyde recorded her intention to write her semi-autobiographical novel *The Godwits Fly* (1938) that would tell of ‘the Colonial England-hunger, and they that depart and they that stay home’.<sup>412</sup> Hyde noted in her foreword to *The Godwits Fly* that she was aware that godwits migrated to Siberia and not

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<sup>411</sup> Mack, p. 246.

<sup>412</sup> Gloria Rawlinson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Godwits Fly* by Robin Hyde (1938; repr. Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1970), pp. ix-xviii (p. xiv).

England, 'But to a child in this book it was all more simple [...] North was mostly England, or a detour to England'.<sup>413</sup> Hyde's mother had always regarded England as home and was 'haunted by the love of a country she had never seen'.<sup>414</sup> Hyde's child protagonist of *The Godwits Fly*, Eliza Hannay, like the young Hyde, writes poetry about England. When asked 'Why England?', she responds: 'don't you think we live half our lives in England anyhow? [...] We belong there, don't we?' This dominance of England is reinforced by the images of English landscapes that were routinely used, even though they bore no resemblance to New Zealand:

You were English and not English. It took time to realize that England was far away. And you were brought up on bluebells and primroses and daffodils and robins in the snow – even the Christmas cards were always robins in the snow. One day, with a little shock of anger, you realized that there were no robins and no snow, and you felt cheated.<sup>415</sup>

Hyde left New Zealand for England on 18 January 1938. Derek Challis has argued that the journey was motivated by Hyde's need to establish herself as a novelist rather than by 'Colonial England-hunger'. For Hyde, London would validate her 'in the eyes of the world and in the minds of her own countrymen'.<sup>416</sup> This turned out not to be the case: London was a series of disappointments for Hyde exacerbated by illness and money worries. She moved from a feeling of identification with England to a feeling of displacement, which served to reinforce her sense of herself as a New Zealander: 'I realized quite clearly I was still in love with New Zealand.'<sup>417</sup> A similar realisation occurred to the American Margaret Halsey, writing in 1938 she stated that 'since I have

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<sup>413</sup> Hyde, *The Godwits Fly*, p. xx.

<sup>414</sup> Gillian Boddy and Jacqueline Matthews, *Disputed Ground: Robin Hyde, Journalist* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>415</sup> Hyde, *Godwits Fly*, pp. 100-101, 34.

<sup>416</sup> Derek Challis, 'Introduction', in *A Home in This World*, by Robin Hyde (1937; repr; Auckland: Longman Paul, 1984), pp. vii-xxi (p. xviii).

<sup>417</sup> Hyde, *Dragon Rampant*, p. 17.

been in England, it has come home to me like a bullet how incorrigibly American I am'.<sup>418</sup>

Hyde moved into a boarding house at 22 Taviton Street, Bloomsbury where a fellow New Zealander James Bertram was staying. The two created a New Zealand enclave, travelling to New Zealand House together each day to read the newspapers, and spending their evenings with Hyde reading poetry she had written about New Zealand.<sup>419</sup> Hyde reversed the situation she had experienced in New Zealand of being surrounded by representations of England: now in England she re-asserted a New Zealand identity in her imagined community within the confines of her Bloomsbury boarding house.<sup>420</sup> This suggests that the boarding house was seen as a site outside of the time and space of London, where alternative spaces could be created.

In her introduction to the 1970 publication of *The Godwits Fly*, Gloria Rawlinson has suggested that Hyde's theme of 'colonial England-hunger' represented the 'transitional mood of the mid-1930s when the colonial outlook was fast yielding to a more immediate sense of Home'.<sup>421</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, in an evaluation of the politics of home in postcolonial fiction, has asserted that 'Imagining a home is as political an act as imagining a nation. Establishing either is a display of hegemonic power'.<sup>422</sup> The politics of this imagining was not always conscious. Nancy Wake, an Australian who became famous for her work as a member of the French Resistance during the Second World War, travelled to London in 1932 and took up residence in 'a cheap boarding house' on the Cromwell Road.<sup>423</sup> Like many of those growing up as part of the British

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<sup>418</sup> Margaret Halsey, *With Malice Toward Some* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), p. 82.

<sup>419</sup> Boddy and Matthews, p. 72.

<sup>420</sup> Hyde's stay at the Bloomsbury boarding house was brief, she was admitted to hospital with health problems and when she returned to London she took a room in a boarding house in Kensington where she committed suicide on 23 August 1939.

<sup>421</sup> Rawlinson, p. xvii.

<sup>422</sup> Rosemary Marangoly George, *The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>423</sup> Nancy Wake, *The Autobiography of the Woman the Gestapo Called The White Mouse* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1985), p. 1.

Empire, Wake's initial reactions to England, and particularly London, were mediated through the representations absorbed in childhood that had become as familiar to her as her actual experiences: what Dennis Porter has referred to as the 'déjà vu' or 'haunted' nature of travelling.<sup>424</sup> Wake had grown up in Australia singing a rhyme about Big Ben:

I am Big Ben  
Hear what I say  
All other clocks  
Get out of my way<sup>425</sup>

The implied message of British domination in this childhood rhyme was adopted unquestioningly by Wake once she was in London. London's history 'made Sydney's look infantile by comparison' and Wake 'felt a little *sniffy* when she gazed back upon the tired old life she imagined her friends and family must be living in Sydney'.<sup>426</sup> Empire was about power and much of this power stemmed from its ability to reproduce difference and inequality among those it was supposed to include, and the extent to which that difference could be 'institutionalized'.<sup>427</sup> Wake had been institutionalised to identify with a country that she had never seen and to view it as a part of her. However, unlike Robin Hyde, for whom the confrontation with the real England displaced the imaginary one and allowed a re-assertion of her New Zealand identity, Wake's identification with Britain was stronger after her arrival in the country she had only ever imagined, than it was for Australia, the country in which she had grown up. George has argued that when immigration forces home to be re-imagined, and especially when it is subsequently fictionalised, any 'cultural baggage' that has been carried to the new country is often found to be 'quite dispensable and / or replaceable'.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Dennis Porter, *Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 12.

<sup>425</sup> Peter Fitzsimons, *Nancy Wake: The Inspiring Story of One of the War's Greatest Heroines* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), p. 43.

<sup>426</sup> Fitzsimons, p. 43.

<sup>427</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 27.

<sup>428</sup> George, p. 170.

When discussing these visitors to Britain it is important to distinguish between those who stayed for only a short period of time and those who found work and attempted to make Britain a long-term home. The differences in perception of short and long term visitors were often economically determined: those who were occupying a room for less than a month while holidaying would have a different view from those who were forced to live in that room because they could not afford an alternative. There was a social acceptance of the female travellers' place within the boarding house; as short-term occupants they were in their defined space. They were 'out of place' in terms of being foreign to Britain, but 'in place' in the recognised boundaries of a London boarding house. They were accepted as long as they remained contained within these boundaries for the duration of their visit and did not attempt to become long-term residents or to marry into British society. This was recognised by Mary Ellen Chase, an American scholar who spent a two-year residence in Cambridge and who wrote an account of her time, *In England Now* (1937):

In England all who are not English are foreigners. The term is not given in opprobrium; it is merely a fact, downright and inescapable. In England the American is a foreigner precisely as is the Jew, the Frenchman and the Spaniard. The Englishman has no objection to foreigners, providing they remain what they are and do not attempt any approximation to him.<sup>429</sup>

The imagined and culturally constructed image of the boarding house for American and colonial visitors was often a highly mythologised one, and although often constructed from the less than glamorous depictions in Victorian literature (such as Charles Dickens or Arthur Conan Doyle) it remained distinguished by being part of all that was seen to be exclusively British. Referring to the short-term visitor, Blanche McManus commented that 'the American has usually nothing but praise for the London boarding house'.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>429</sup> Mary Ellen Chase, *In England Now* (London: Collins Forty-Eight, 1937), pp. 35-6.

<sup>430</sup> McManus, p. 138.

For the traveller, the positive associations with Britain brought from their homeland continued to be overlaid upon the negative and less than glamorous aspects of boarding house life, until they were forced by experience to be re-evaluated. In her account of her trip to London, *An American's London* (1920), Louise Closser Hale wrote that she might have reconsidered her visit if she had known 'how cold it was to be'. Although she had read extensively about London before her arrival she explained she had 'only read tranquilly of the discomforts of eight million Londoners, not having experienced them myself'.<sup>431</sup> Certain images were more pervasive than others: just as the cold and smog of London were the dominant negative images of the metropolis, so the cold, the smell and the lack of cleanliness resonated as the negative aspects of the accommodation. Against this perspective, the space of the boarding house in the 1930s was also a place of freedom, both physically and intellectually, for the colonial traveller. The cold and dirt could be disregarded for the cheapness that enabled money to be spent on experiencing life outside the boarding house.

Expatriate life was often seen as 'an exoticised experience, a way of life separate and distinct from the ordinariness of the "home" culture' and this was complicated further for colonial travellers residing in Britain.<sup>432</sup> In a perverse reversal of Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism', the imagery of Britain became seductive to the colonial traveller as, 'a place of romance' and 'haunting memories and landscapes'; but unlike the British adventurer colonising new lands, the colonials already felt a part of this imagined land.<sup>433</sup> They had grown-up believing they were entitled to consider Britain their own, as part of a shared history of who they were. Britain and London become mythical places, mapped by colonial memory and, by extension, the boarding house became part of this colonial myth, created through the empire's domination of the literature and culture of its colonies,

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<sup>431</sup> Hale, p. 42.

<sup>432</sup> Caron Eastgate Dann, *Imagining Siam: A Travellers' Literary Guide to Thailand* (Victoria, Australia: Monash University Press), p. 65.

<sup>433</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 1.

and perpetuated through travellers' accounts. The next section will examine how race intersects and complicates this colonial myth.

#### 4.2 Una Marson, Jean Rhys and The Disillusionment of 'This Dismal City'

What are you seeking  
To discover in this dismal  
City of ours?  
From the look in your eyes  
Little brown girl  
I know it is something that does not really exist.<sup>434</sup>

In her poem 'Little Brown Girl' written in London in the 1930s, the Jamaican poet and activist, Una Marson, articulated the outsider status for the 'little brown girl' in the 'white, white city' that was the British capital.<sup>435</sup> Significantly, what Marson also captured was the acute sense of disappointment that the reality of the city had failed her. Marson had been brought up to believe in the same mythical ideal of Britain as the white colonials from Australia and New Zealand discussed in the previous section; however, Marson was further displaced from an illusion of shared identity by her race, which, in the predominantly white city of interwar London, made her outsider status outwardly visible.

Black colonial women were less likely to occupy boarding houses alone. Unmarried working-class black women who came to Britain to work were usually servants in residential employment. Of the small numbers of unmarried middle-class black women who came to Britain as students, the majority were housed with members of their extended families or in supervised student hostels. Statistically, the white colonials and Americans formed the largest group of single women travelling from outside of Britain, and as a group they also had the advantage of a literature of their own, in the form of novels, travelogues, and autobiographies, in which to represent and name their experiences of Britain. A similar body of work does not exist for black colonial women,

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<sup>434</sup> Una Marson, *The Moth and The Star* (Kingston, Jamaica: Published by the author, 1937), p. 13.

<sup>435</sup> Marson, *The Moth and The Star*, p. 11.

and there are only limited accounts of their experiences in Britain. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has referred to the imperialist project behind the act of writing as ‘worlding’, that is the process of creating a world textually out of ‘supposedly uninscribed territory’.<sup>436</sup> It could be argued that these white colonial writers were able to create their own form of ‘worlding’ by writing about the ‘uninscribed territory’ of the boarding house, but in a duplication of the colonial exclusion that had confronted them on arrival of in Britain, so their ‘worlding’ also served to distance their ‘white’ colonial experience from the undocumented black experience.

There was a black community of between twenty and thirty thousand in interwar Britain, comprised mainly of single black men who had gained work in the maritime industry during the war and continued afterwards as maritime workers, domestic servants, or as low-paid migrant labourers.<sup>437</sup> From the eighteenth century small numbers of black women of African and Caribbean descent had been employed in domestic service roles, and some remained in the interwar period with the ambiguous status between slave and servant. In the 1850s small numbers of Indian women arrived in Britain as *ayahs* (nursemaids) brought by families of the British Raj to care for their children and, along with students, lascars, soldiers, and princes, they formed the Indian population in Britain up until the Second World War.<sup>438</sup>

There was also a small minority of middle-class black women, most of whom were students. Single black women studying in Britain came primarily from India, where a British education was held in high esteem. In the 1930s there were just over one

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<sup>436</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Postcolonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. by Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>437</sup> Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>438</sup> See Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700-1947* (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

hundred Indian women in Britain studying for degrees in medicine, law and education.<sup>439</sup> Atiya Fyzee, an unmarried Muslim woman, arrived in London from Bombay on a scholarship in 1906 to train as a teacher and was one of the first Asian women to write about her experiences of London. She kept a *roznamchah* (a travelogue-cum-diary) of her time in the form of regular letters to her two sisters that were published in book form in 1921 entitled *Zamana-I-tahsil (A Time of Education)*.<sup>440</sup> Cornelia Sorabji came to Oxford to study for a law degree in 1889 and was the first woman of any race or nationality to do so. In her memoirs *India Calling* (1934) she recounts her first experience of London:

London, and the way it caught one's heart, first seen . . . the feeling of standing at the core of the traffic, one morning at the Exchange, and knowing one's self utterly insignificant and alone, yet alive and perfectly companioned [...] the exhilaration of London fogs: dream cities: the towers of Westminster in a white mist.<sup>441</sup>

Growing up as part of the British empire, Sorabji had received an English education: 'We were [...] "brought up English" – i.e. on English nursery tales with English discipline; on the English language, used with our Father and Mother, in a home furnished like an English home'. This upbringing did not turn the reality of England into disillusionment, instead it reinforced Sorabji's perception of her shared background, and she continued to think of her time in England as a time of privilege that enabled her to get 'England into my bones'.<sup>442</sup> Although she was conscious of her difference and outsider status Sorabji seems to have accepted it and her account does not mention encountering hostile reactions to being the only Indian woman in Oxford.

Accounts of colonial experiences of the British capital by Indian women who came to Britain to study were largely positive, perhaps because they were often sheltered

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<sup>439</sup> Parminder Bhachu, 'Identities Constructed and Reconstructed: Representations of Asian Women in Britain' in *Migrant Women: Crossing Boundaries and Changing Identities*, ed. by Gina Buijs (Oxford: Berg, 1993), pp. 99-117 (p. 102).

<sup>440</sup> Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, 'Forging Global Networks in the Imperial Era: Atiya Fyzee in Edwardian London', conference paper presented at *Bharat Britain: South Asians Making Britain, 1870-1950*, 13 September 2010, The British Library, London.

<sup>441</sup> Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji* (London: Nisbet & Co, 1934), p. xi.

<sup>442</sup> Sorabji, pp. 7, 24.

within the confines of the university from the prosaic aspects of everyday living, such as earning money and managing their own accommodation. Awareness that their stay was only temporary also appears to have given them different expectations from those who were seeking to make Britain a long-term home.

### **Una Marson and London**

Una Marson was unusual in being a single black woman who travelled to London; she was also unusual in not being a student and coming to Britain in search of work and accommodation.<sup>443</sup> Arriving in Plymouth for the first time on 9 July 1932, at the age of twenty-seven, Marson proceeded directly to London, where she would live until 1936 and then, after a brief return to Jamaica, from 1938 to 1946.

In London Marson discovered that the England that had enchanted her childhood, and impressed her older self as the birthplace of the Romantic poets, was not the ‘land of gracious living’ she had anticipated; instead it was a hostile place with colour bars excluding her from work and lodgings.<sup>444</sup> These colour bars were not explicit, as Marson commented in the British Commonwealth League Conference in London in June 1934:

In America they tell you frankly where you are not wanted by means of big signs, and they don’t try to hide their feelings. But in England, though the people will never say what they feel about us, you come up against incidents which hurt so much you cannot talk about them.<sup>445</sup>

This racism excluded Marson from the hotels and boarding houses that usually provided accommodation for new arrivals to London. Marson eventually found board and lodging in the Peckham home of Dr Harold Moody, the Jamaican-born doctor and founder of The League of Coloured Peoples. Dr Moody and his wife opened their large Victorian home to black travellers and students who had difficulty finding accommodation elsewhere.<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>443</sup> Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life of Una Marson: 1905-65* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 48.

<sup>444</sup> Jarrett-Macauley, p. 44.

<sup>445</sup> Reported in *The Keys*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (July-September 1934), p. 17.

<sup>446</sup> Jarrett-Macauley, p.46.

Living in Dr Moody's house would probably have been a very different experience to living in a Bloomsbury boarding house. As an enclave within the city it would certainly have offered Marson some protection from the racism of London and would have been more like living in a family home. Unfortunately we do not know what Marson's experience of the house was, although Marson left behind poetry, journalism, and plays that documented her experiences in Britain there are no accounts of her accommodation. There is evidence that she started an autobiography, but no trace of it has been found.<sup>447</sup>

Finding somewhere to stay was a common problem confronting black people arriving in England, as David Tucker commented in his editorial for the first issue of *The Keys*: 'Hotels, restaurants, and lodging houses refuse us with impunity [...] Our plea in closing, is for equality of opportunity. We are knocking at the door and will not be denied'. Tucker referred to 'the spiked heel of racial prejudice' that denies this equality of opportunity.<sup>448</sup> In July 1933, after an unsuccessful year searching for employment and being rejected by that 'spiked heel', Dr Moody offered her a position as assistant secretary on the first issue of *The Keys* and she became editor by the January 1935 issue.

After Marson had been in England for a year, the Jamaican Marcus Garvey commented: 'Our countrywoman Miss Una Marson went to England some time ago to be disillusioned. She thought she was going to a country where she would be accepted on equal terms with those who built it'. Garvey was a nationalist and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, which sought to obtain independence from the British Empire. Marson was a supporter of his pan-Africanist message of 'African liberation' and, as Alison Donnell has argued, Garvey used Marson's disillusionment to

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<sup>447</sup> See Jarrett-Macauley pp. 82-3

<sup>448</sup> David Tucker, 'Editorial', *The Keys*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (July 1933), pp. 1-2 (p. 2).

illustrate the racism of ‘the metropolitan motherland’, that black travellers to Britain did not anticipate.<sup>449</sup>

The country to which Marson wanted to belong was a mythical location that, as the poem ‘Little Brown Girl’ expressed, did ‘not really exist’. It is an imaginary London from which she was excluded, for it is ‘*their* white, white city’ [emphasis mine].<sup>450</sup> Jamaica had been a British colony since 1655 and Marson had grown up believing she shared an inclusive identity with inhabitants of Britain as a British subject. However, colonial power relations reinforced Marson’s outsider status and confirmed the sharp contrast between the image and the reality, and the colonised and the coloniser. In his book *Out of Place*, Ian Baucom has pointed out that the tension between ‘British’ and ‘English’ space emerged with the increase in immigration in the interwar period, and the fears that there would be a need to ‘expand the catalog of Englishness’. Those who wanted to preserve ‘Englishness’ could do so:

by insisting that the empire had little or nothing to do with England, by defining imperial space as something subordinate to but quite different from English space, and by identifying the empire’s subjects as persons subordinate to but quite different from England’s subjects – by identifying these as *British* spaces and *British* subjects: a solution that manages the neat trick of allowing England to simultaneously avow and disavow its empire.<sup>451</sup>

All British subjects could thus inhabit British space and adopt a collective identity of British subjectivity but, despite the undeniable fact that British space clearly included English space, only those who were actually born in the geographical area of England could ever belong in English space.

Marson’s attempts to integrate herself into British society were compounded not only by her race, but also by her gender and her marital status. Marson’s biographer

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<sup>449</sup> Marcus Garvey, *New Jamaican*, 20 February 1933, quoted in Alison Donnell, ‘Una Marson: Feminism, Anti-Colonialism and a Forgotten Fight for Freedom’ in *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*, ed. by Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 114-31 (p. 123).

<sup>450</sup> Marson, *The Moth and The Star*, pp. 13, 11.

<sup>451</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 6.

Delia Jarrett-Macauley has pointed out that: ‘Una didn’t fit in anywhere’.<sup>452</sup> As an educated, politically active, middle-class woman, who was neither a student nor a wife, Marson was outside the existing communities of black women in Britain. Marson was clearly aware that her appearance made her unusual in 1930s London, and therefore highly visible and subject to the voyeurism of the English gaze: ‘You are exotic’, says the white speaker to the little brown girl in Marson’s poem.<sup>453</sup>

Despite not seeming to ‘fit in’ with the conventional roles that were available for a black woman at the time, Marson found an alternative community through her politics. She became part of the, predominately male, black intellectual and political community of 1930s London that included C. L. R. James, George Padmore, and Jomo Kenyatta.<sup>454</sup> Marson’s membership of the League of Coloured Peoples facilitated many of her meetings with prominent intellectuals and reformers of the period. The League of Coloured Peoples was based in Dr Moody’s house, making it a striking example of an imagined community standing in for a nation: within the walls of his family home was a ‘colony’ within the imperial metropolis. It enabled Marson to join a community that originated inside a private space, but was also part of a much wider public space: a global black network that had cultural and political reach in the wider world.

Marson always wrote out of the sense of being part of a much wider group. Her sense of having what Anna Snaith has described as ‘a liminal identity’ that is simultaneously ‘Caribbean, African and British’, enabled Marson to adopt many voices and to ‘focus on the performative aspects of those identities and to represent them on stage’.<sup>455</sup> This allowed Marson to express her experience as part of the collective of black people.

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<sup>452</sup> Jarrett-Macauley, p. 48.

<sup>453</sup> Marson, *The Moth and The Star*, p. 13.

<sup>454</sup> Anna Snaith, “‘Little Brown Girl’ in a “White, White City”: Una Marson and London’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 27 (2008), 93-114 (p. 95).

<sup>455</sup> Snaith, ‘Little Brown Girl’, p. 96.

Mary Lou Emery has argued that Marson's work 'engaged in the paradoxes of colonial mimicry', writing within the European traditions while using 'those traditions to explore opposition to the assumptions and hierarchies of colonialism'.<sup>456</sup> This is evident in her poetry and is particularly notable in Marson's unpublished three-act play *London Calling*, started in London and finished after her return to Jamaica in 1937. I want to look briefly at this play, for although Marson left behind no account of her experiences of living in a room in Dr Moody's house, the play does provide a fictional account of a colonial woman living in a room in a shared flatlet.

The play concerns a group of Caribbean drama students who share a flatlet in Bloomsbury in the mid-1930s. The students are from an imaginary Caribbean island and British colony called Novoka where they 'have only English customs'.<sup>457</sup> Her central characters are Rita Fray, her brother Sydney, and their friend Alton Lane, who live together and are invited to perform a 'native sketch' by the International Students' Society. The students enlist the help of an African law student to dress them as Africans, as they feel unable to be suitably 'native' with their British upbringings, and thus within the play the drama students perform another play that engages with the racism of colonial stereotypes and the British ignorance of colonial cultures.

The opening act of the play is set in winter 1934, and introduces Rita's dissatisfaction with London and her accommodation. The stage directions state: 'Rita Raw kneeling in rug by coal fire', the use of the word 'raw' indicating the extreme nature of the cold. The illusion to the British weather is reinforced further by the radio playing the weather forecast in the background announcing 'A low depression centred off Iceland' (1,1,1). The initial dialogue between Rita and her fellow lodger Alton recounts Rita's

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<sup>456</sup> Mary Lou Emery, *Modernism, The Visual, and Caribbean Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 123-24.

<sup>457</sup> Una Marson, *London Calling*, (1936-7), Unpublished playscript, MD1944A-D, National Library of Jamaica, Kingston, Jamaica, Act 1, Scene 1, p. 11. Subsequent references to act, scene and page will be cited parenthetically in the text.

frustration and discontent with Britain. She relates her feelings in a thinly disguised allusion to the weather by telling Alton that ‘a depression is moving South East as usual’, before stating plainly that she would like ‘first and foremost to be back home where I belong’ (1,1,1-2). Her time spent in London is described as ‘two long eternal years’ and she is ‘just fed up’ (1,1,2). As the only woman in the shared flat, Rita complains she has to ‘be maid and general servant to this flat. Look at my hands’ (1,1,2). Money is also a concern: Rita uses coal because it is cheaper than running gas or electricity. The first act closes with the wireless playing ‘no place like home’ and Rita sobbing.

Rita’s feelings of isolation in her single room do not necessarily mirror those of Marson. Jarrett-Macauley has asserted that Marson learnt to be independent after her father’s death when she was ten and that she ‘relished the semi-nomadic existence: never a permanent home, but a “room of her own” and suitcases always half-packed. Like a gypsy, she put her trust in impermanence’.<sup>458</sup> Marson does not make Rita’s unhappiness permanent though, she closes the play with Rita having received two marriage proposals and choosing to marry her flatmate Alton.

At the end of the play Marson again uses the weather to show Rita’s mood. As spring arrives, Rita’s depression seems to lift with the sunshine and the blooming of the daffodils that Sydney refers to as ‘Spring fever’ (3,1,4). The daffodils, an image of Englishness immortalised by Wordsworth and emblematic of the English poetic tradition, connect Rita with that heritage and, by extension, link her with the colonial heritage that she has unquestioningly adopted with the onset of spring: ‘London grows on one – besides, Daffodi[ls] are here’ (3,1,4). Elaine Campbell has argued that, ‘Especially problematic from the point of view of today’s concern with neo-colonial values is Rita and Alton’s contented acceptance of London life. Acceptance is, of course, part of the

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<sup>458</sup> Jarrett-Macauley, p. 20.

happy ending'.<sup>459</sup> This acceptance seems at odds with what Rita has said at the beginning of the play, when she states clearly that she had been unhappy the whole time she had been in London, and must have experienced the spring previously.

Although *London Calling* uses many of the tropes of the romantic comedy, it has a strong political message about the discrimination facing black colonials and the wider concerns of a declining empire. It could be argued that Marson's use of the conventional ending, which makes everything accepted and acceptable, actually draws attention to the fact that these issues could not be so easily resolved. This would make the ending another aspect of colonial mimicry on Marson's part, for it allows her political ideas about discrimination to masquerade behind the overt comedy of excessive racial stereotypes. The conventional trope of spring joy and daffodils then serves to simultaneously draw attention to the colonial mask while revealing the truth behind. The play format certainly allowed Marson to 'stage' her political ideas in a way that was not possible from the single person perspective of her journalism. Marson could demonstrate and ridicule racist opinions through her characters by adopting the collective voices of both the British establishment: 'Just suppose they bring their idols [...] and burn things in their rooms' (2,1,4), and the supporter of colonial minorities: 'I want you to believe that there are many of us who desire to humanise social contacts but we lack the courage' (3,1,11).

*London Calling* offers a rare insight into the lives of black colonials in London in the 1930s, and evidence suggests that it reflected Marson's own feelings of racial rejection by the English. Rita is disillusioned that the England in which she is now living does not parallel the English customs and imaginary England with which she has been raised. Ironically, Rita's unhappiness with her room in Bloomsbury and the racial

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<sup>459</sup> Elaine Campbell, 'The Unpublished Plays of Una Marson', *Anglophone Karibik – USA*. Germany: Redaktion Gulliver 30 (1991), 110-116 (p. 112).

discrimination she faces makes her homesick for a country that rather than actually being England only mimics English customs.

### **Jean Rhys and Creole Representations**

In Jean Rhys's novel *Voyage in the Dark* (1934), Anna Morgan has also come to accept her life in Britain, but she is still unable to get used to the cold: 'After a while I got used to England and I liked it all right; I got used to everything expect the cold' (VD 8). Before Anna came to England from her home in the West Indies she had also built up an imaginary version of what the country would be like: 'I had read about England ever since I could read', but when she arrives she finds it 'smaller meaner [...] this is London – hundreds thousands of white people' (VD 15). Anna experiences England as a series of place-images that 'always looked so exactly alike' (VD 8), from the towns and houses to the boarding house bedrooms and breakfasts:

Always a high, dark wardrobe and something dirty red in the room; and through the window the feeling of a small street would come in. And the breakfast-tray dumped down on the bed, two plates with a bit of curled-up bacon on each (VD 128).

This similarity serves to highlight Anna's own difference and her feelings of alienation towards her surroundings. The dark, claustrophobic images of the rooms contrast sharply with the expansiveness and colour of her home in the West Indies that she inhabits in her imagination. In a recent essay, Snaith has highlighted the lack of critical attention in Rhys scholarship that has been given to the connection between Anna's Creole background and her experience of London: 'The unease with which Rhys and her protagonists [...] experience London's streets is about the discomfort not just of the single woman, but of the single *colonial* woman, who occupies a doubly transgressive position in the metropole'.<sup>460</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Anna Snaith, "'A Savage from the Cannibal islands": Jean Rhys in London' in *Geographies of Modernism*, pp. 76-85 (p. 76).

Anna is caught between her current life in London and the memories of her home in the West Indies, unable to locate herself securely within geographical, social and cultural boundaries. In the West Indies, Anna's whiteness had marked her out as different, but although in England her physical appearance enables her to pass, she cannot assimilate herself into English life and feels alienated from both cultures. Anna's constant coldness becomes symbolic of her difference. When she sees Anna shiver her friend Maudie asks, 'Do you do it on purpose or what?' (VD 14), but Maudie explains to the men that they have met: 'She can't help it. She was born in a hot place. She was born in the West Indies or somewhere' (VD 12).

Helen Carr has argued that Rhys's 'lifelong sense of homelessness' began in the Caribbean where Rhys, a White Creole, fantasised about becoming black in order to feel a sense of belonging 'but she repeatedly discovered she was alien, suspect, even hated'. When Rhys arrived in England although her skin colour did not mark her out as different she found herself again classified as 'alien' through her strong Caribbean accent, which also assigned her place in the English class system.<sup>461</sup> Because Creole could refer to both African and European peoples of the West Indies, Snaith has pointed out that it 'allowed for a racial ambiguity that erased the possibility of the "pure", "respectable" white Creole woman'.<sup>462</sup> This partial adoption of Caribbean culture and language by white Europeans is what gives the white Creole a liminal status, Erin Skye Mackie has argued that the 'white Creole type is transitional' because her identity is never fixed and she 'straddles the fence between cultural and racial ethnic notions'.<sup>463</sup> The plural designation of the white Creole, who epitomises racial difference despite her outwardly white appearance, is further complicated by the white Creole woman, who is physically white 'yet inescapably

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<sup>461</sup> Helen Carr, "'Intemperate and Unchaste": Jean Rhys and Caribbean Creole Identity', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 14 (2003), 38-62 (pp. 43, 45).

<sup>462</sup> Snaith, 'A Savage from the Cannibal islands', p. 83.

<sup>463</sup> Erin Skye Mackie, 'Cultural Cross-Dressing: The Colorful Case of the Caribbean Creole', in *The Clothes That Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, ed. by Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1999), pp. 250-70 (p. 263-4).

black, and thus unable to shake the lascivious and ardent stereotypes of black female sexuality'.<sup>464</sup>

This overlaying of sexual stereotypes can be seen in *Voyage in the Dark*, Anna also becomes the exotic and eroticised other and her fellow chorus girls call her 'the Hottentot' (VD 12). As Sander Gilman has pointed out, the Hottentot woman became a frequent subject for 'erotic caricature'. She was not only the 'epitome of this sexual lasciviousness' to the nineteenth-century Europeans, her "'primitive" sexual appetite' was externally apparent through her "'primitive" genitalia'.<sup>465</sup> After he has seduced her, Anna's lover Walter also makes references to Anna's sexual appetite 'He imitated me. "Let's go upstairs, let's go upstairs. You really shock me sometimes, Miss Morgan"' (VD 76). Although Anna wants to confine their love to bedrooms, on their short trip to the countryside, Walter fetishises Anna's sexuality as unconfined by the conventions of homes and hotel rooms. He wants to position Anna among the trees and bright flowers to recreate the exotic background of the Caribbean: 'Have you got flowers like these in your island? [...] I've wanted to bring you to Savernake and see you underneath these trees ever since I've known you' (VD 67). Walter connects Anna with an animal-like sexuality and he wants to make love to her in the open air in 'holes where the deer shelter for the winter' (VD 68). Rhys implies that Walter views Anna as an exotic other, who is outside the category of potential marriage partner. It is this transient aspect of her, overlaid with racial ideas of exoticism, which make her attractive to him. Anna wants a permanent relationship from Walter, but he only seeks a temporary distraction in an exotic fantasy.

Carole Angier has described the paradox of England for Anna: 'England, the apotheosis of power and possession, both everything Anna longs for – protection, security

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<sup>464</sup> T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 46.

<sup>465</sup> Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 90, 85.

– and everything she fears – rejection, exclusion – England is a high, dark wall’.<sup>466</sup> Rhys demonstrates that Anna’s is a resigned acceptance of her life in England, there is no romantic ending in her novel and happiness does not arrive with the spring daffodils.

### **4.3 ‘The landlady’s daughter was often a snare’: Indian Students and the Boarding House**

Previous chapters in this thesis have touched on British landladies taking in foreign boarders, particularly foreign students. These ranged from the reference in Gibbons’s novel *Bassett*, ‘Indians. Research students, I believe’ (B 307) who ‘seem so much easier to *get* than white people’ (B 35), to the house ‘full of foreigners’ (CT 22) described by Catherine Thackray in her autobiography. The last chapter also suggested that landladies would often be keen to marry their daughters to their more affluent boarders. In this section I want to extend my inquiry in order to examine the relationship between the landlady, her family, and her non-British boarders and the complex intersection between issues of race and class engendered by these relationships. By the 1930s, the emerging fears for the degeneration of the population after the Great War had generated an increased interest in eugenics and the selective breeding of the intelligent and racially pure, which heightened social and political anxiety concerning race-mixing.<sup>467</sup>

Indian students, both male and female, comprised the largest group of foreign students in the thirties. From 1930-35 the annual reports issued by the Office of the High Commissioner for India on the work of the Education Department estimated an annual average of two thousand seven hundred students in the universities and colleges of Great Britain and Ireland. These students came from homes outside the British Isles but within the British Empire, with an annual average of one thousand five hundred full-time Indian

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<sup>466</sup> Carole Angier, ‘Introduction’, in *Voyage in the Dark* by Jean Rhys, pp. v-xiv (p. xi).

<sup>467</sup> Pugh, p. 150.

students.<sup>468</sup> The number of Indian students remained at this level, peaking at one thousand five hundred and sixty-six in the academic year 1937-38, before declining to eight hundred and ninety-two with the outbreak of war in 1939.<sup>469</sup>

Throughout the early nineteen thirties the number of Indian women students remained constant at around one hundred, increasing to one hundred and thirty-one in the academic year 1938-39.<sup>470</sup> The outbreak of war reduced the number of Indian women students nearly by half to seventy-one.<sup>471</sup> The majority of Indian women students came to Britain to study teaching or medicine and were housed with their extended family or in hostels or residential university accommodation. In 1920 the London School of Medicine for Women, with the support of the India Office, opened a hostel for the increasing numbers of Indian women medical students.<sup>472</sup>

On the 14 April 1907 the Secretary of State for India appointed a committee at the India Office 'to inquire and report upon' Indian students who came to the United Kingdom to study for university degrees.<sup>473</sup> Interviews conducted by the Committee in the early twenties reported that the two main reasons given by Indian students for travelling to Britain for their education was first, that a British education was thought to give priority in securing a better job in India, particularly in the Indian public services where preference was given to British qualifications; and second, that the educational facilities in Britain were thought to be better than those available in India.<sup>474</sup>

A further reason less explicit in these interviews was one that has already been discussed in this chapter: the desire to see the place that had been imagined since

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468 Thomas Quayle, *Office of the High Commissioner for India: Report on the Work of the Education Department London, 1934-35* (London: HMSO, 1936), p. 9.

469 Quayle, *Report 1937-38*, p. 8; Quayle, *Report 1939-40*, p. 6.

470 Quayle, *Report 1934-35*, p. 12; Quayle, *Report 1938-39*, p. 6.

471 Quayle, *Report 1939-40*, p. 6.

472 Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identity 1880-1930* (London: Frank Cass, 2000), p. 13.

<sup>473</sup> *Report and Minutes of Evidence of the Committee Appointed by the Secretary of State for India to Inquire into the Position of Indian Students in the United Kingdom* (1907), India Office Records L/PJ/6/845, The British Library, London, p. 5.

474 *Report of the Committee on Indian Students 1921-22* (London: HMSO, 1922), p. 9.

childhood. Suryya Kumar Bhuyan, an Assamese historian who came to London in 1936 to study at the School of Oriental Studies, wrote in his memoirs about his ‘long-cherished desire to see England to have a first-hand knowledge of the things I had heard and read about’.<sup>475</sup> Studying in Britain provided the opportunity to absorb the English customs and behaviours that would enhance the scholar’s social status on return to India. Bhuyan asserted that a person returning from Britain ‘commanded considerable distinction in [Indian] society, whatever might be his actual achievement’ and, because of this, going to England was an ambition of even the youngest school child.<sup>476</sup>

The large numbers of male Indian students meant that many were forced to seek residence outside the university, particularly in London where the majority of Indian students were concentrated and where, unlike Oxford and Cambridge, there was no residential system in place. The Committee of Indian Students described the common experience of the young Indian student on arrival in London:

He puts up for the first night in some hotel in the Strand, and the next morning he finds that the charges are beyond his slender purse; he then goes to some boarding-house where he finds that he can meet the expenses. I may incidentally mention here that these boarding-houses are mostly full of foreigners, who can hardly speak the language of this country.<sup>477</sup>

Due to the unexpected expense of living in Britain many students would seek cheaper accommodation in poorer areas of the city, where the landladies would also be less likely to turn them away due to their colour. A survey carried out by an organisation that acted as a liaison between students and accommodation owners at the end of the 1930s asked seven hundred and one boarding and lodging house proprietors across London if they would accept ‘coloured’ students.<sup>478</sup> Those in the South East of London and Bloomsbury

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475 S. K. Bhuyan, *From a Historian’s Haversack: London Memories* (Assam: Gauhati Publication Board, 1979), p. 57.

476 Bhuyan, p. 1.

477 *Report on Indian Students 1921-22*, pp. 17, 81-2.

478 The survey is reported in K. L. Little, ‘A Note on Colour Prejudice Amongst the English “Middle Class”’, *Man*, 43 (1943), 104-7. Little noted that the material was collected ‘in the years immediate to the present war’, p. 105.

were the most likely to say they would (sixty-three per cent and fifty-nine per cent respectively), compared to those in Chelsea or Hampstead (forty-seven per cent).<sup>479</sup>

There was considerable worry expressed by the Committee that Indian students would ‘fall victims to the cupidity of lodging-house keepers or other unscrupulous persons’ as ‘their ignorance of English social conventions often exposes them to misunderstanding, besides making it very difficult for them to discriminate between their English acquaintances’.<sup>480</sup> By ‘discriminate’ the Committee seems to imply that the newly arrived student would be unaware of the gradients of the English class system and so would be unable to judge the suitability of a new associate in relation to their own social standing in India. An earlier report of the Committee stated:

We do not consider that a young man who moves in good society in India can be held to have derived the maximum of advantage from a visit to England, if his friends in this country are confined to the relations and *clientèle* of the landlady of his lodgings.<sup>481</sup>

Indian students in rented accommodation would have little opportunity of socialising with other English students and their home life was centred entirely on their boarding house.<sup>482</sup>

Describing his boarding house in Belsize Park, Bhuyan noted that, ‘The boarders were almost all Indians, students and businessmen, and I was quite at home with them’.<sup>483</sup> This limited social circle meant that any romantic liaisons would also be initiated within the boarding house.

Shompa Lahiri has pointed out that the Indian student was the subject of many popular novels by Anglo-Indian women who had returned to Britain from India in the early twentieth century. These novels were ‘crude and sensationalist’ romance and adventure stories depicting the allure of Indian students mistaken for men of wealth, or

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<sup>479</sup> K. L. Little, p. 107.

<sup>480</sup> *Report on Indian Students 1921-22*, p. 82.

<sup>481</sup> India Office Records L/PJ/6/845, p. 24.

<sup>482</sup> Lahiri, p.73.

<sup>483</sup> Bhuyan, p. 57.

even princes, because of their appearance and gentlemanly conduct.<sup>484</sup> The students were portrayed as the seducers, tempting the working-class white woman into marriage and then taking her to India where the relationship encountered various racial stereotypes Indian male brutality, often with the additional challenge of his family disapproval and a pre-existing Indian wife and family. The mixed marriage, as depicted by the Anglo-Indian writers as a union of an Indian male and an English female, would be invariably doomed to end in failure and the writers' opprobrium would be much in evidence.<sup>485</sup> These tales were read primarily as exoticised rags to riches romances by working-class women who were, Lahiri has argued, 'the very people Indians who lived in rented accommodation, especially in London, had most contact with during their residence in England'.<sup>486</sup> However, a piece of historical documentation refutes the novelistic image of the Indian student as seducer, suggesting that it is the working-class girl, the landlady's daughter, who was playing the part of the temptress. Dr Knight, a lecturer at Edinburgh University, who gave evidence to the Committee of Indian Students on 19 July 1907, observed that students were targeted by:

shop girls and women of that class; this was especially the case in regard to Indians, who were generally considered to be "princes". In old days, when almost all Indians came to Portobello [the residential college], there had been very few mishaps; but now that Indians knew their way about better, and many of them went into lodgings [...] mishaps were very frequent. The landlady's daughter was often a snare.<sup>487</sup>

The use of the term 'snare' suggests that the daughter was often the bait in a trap laid by her mother, the landlady. In these Anglo-Indian popular novels power relations between India and England, the Colony and the Coloniser, male and female are inverted and as a result class and race positions are disrupted. What is of interest in the boarding house relationship is how the commercial aspect of the arrangement further complicates these

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<sup>484</sup> Lahiri, p. 91.

<sup>485</sup> Bhupal Singh, *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 171

<sup>486</sup> Lahiri, p. 92.

<sup>487</sup> India Office Records L/PJ/6/845, p. 283.

power relations. The landlady is able to assert a certain amount of power over the Indian student; she can eject him from her home if he fails to obey her rules, but her position of power is always ambivalent, undermined by her gender, her class position and her economic dependence on the Indian student's money. The student pays his landlady money in return for his board and lodgings and this includes room cleaning and often laundry; menial services that the more affluent Indian student would be accustomed to a servant performing.

When a boarder becomes involved with a landlady's daughter a different kind of transaction emerges, but one on which an economic value is still placed, raising the question about the nature of the services being paid for by their rental money. Published anonymously in 1924, the novel *East and West: The Confessions of a Princess* tells the story of Lola, the daughter of a boarding house keeper and was purportedly based on real events in a London boarding house. Lola's mother runs a boarding house in Bayswater and when Mindoon, who claims to be a Burmese Prince, falls in love with her daughter, an amateur actress, Lola's mother attempts to secure Mindoon's brothers as boarders in what can only be described as a commercial transaction:

“Lola,” she began, “I have wonderful news for you. The Prince is willing to place his brothers with us for the time that they will be in England, if I promise that at the end of three years you will become his wife [...] Everything will be changed for us by the magic of money – we shall leave here – I shall no longer be a boarding-house keeper, dependent on the caprices of my patrons [...] while you, my Lola, in the springtime of your youth, will be a Princess.”<sup>488</sup>

Lola has no desire to marry an unknown prince, but her mother informs her that, ‘You will not be called upon to make a promise – I have already done so’.<sup>489</sup> Lola resigns herself to the union for the economic and social standing of her family: ‘We were poor, we had no social position – not to put too fine a point upon it, we were boarding-house

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<sup>488</sup> *East and West: The Confessions of a Princess* (London: Jarrolds, 1924), pp. 42-3.

<sup>489</sup> *East and West*, p. 43.

keepers and, as things appeared at that time, were very unlikely to be anything else'.<sup>490</sup> For Lola's family, the matrimonial arrangement is an opportunity for class mobility and an escape for her mother from the endless toil of domesticity involved in keeping a boarding house. Lola's escape, however, is brief: Mindoon dies of heart failure, leaving her nothing. Acknowledging that both the girl and the Indian student could be guilty of deception, a statement by Mr D. W. Douthwaite, Under-Treasurer of Gray's Inn, for the Committee, candidly observed that in the case of these marriages, 'Usually (but not always) the wife is a young girl of no social standing, who has been deceived by tales of the affluent life she will lead in India. Sometimes I think that the student is himself enticed (or threatened) into marriage'.<sup>491</sup>

#### **'What else in the world could a poor girl wish for?'**

I want to focus on one of these Anglo-Indian novels, Jane Hukk's *Abdullah and His Two Strings* (1927), to examine the depiction of the Indian student and his relationship with his landlady's daughter. The novel was published in 1927 and I demonstrate how its central themes anticipated in fiction some of the concerns of mixed race marriages that I will go on to discuss, which by the 1930s featured heavily in the British press and in India Office correspondence.<sup>492</sup>

Hukk's novel follows the fortunes of Abdullah Khan who leaves his wife and newborn baby in Delhi and comes to Britain to study medicine. He takes a room in Mrs Brown's boarding house where he feels lonely and isolated. The six years of his medical degree are 'like a death sentence' and his room a 'prison cell' (AHTS 66). Abdullah quickly becomes the object of the attentions of Mrs Brown's daughter, Dorothy. Unlike *The Confessions of a Princess*, and Joyce's 'The Boarding House', where the mother is

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<sup>490</sup> *East and West*, p. 41.

<sup>491</sup> India Office Records L/PJ/6/845, p. 75.

<sup>492</sup> Although Hukk wrote two other novels, *The Bridal Creeper* (1928) and *End of a Marriage* (1935), I have been unable to find any further biographical details about her.

portrayed as scheming on behalf of her daughter, in Hukk's novel it is the daughter who is shown from the start to be manipulating the situation.

Dorothy is already engaged to Jim Jackson, a workman of her own social class, but she is attracted by Abdullah's appearance and his suspected wealth: 'The Indian was good-looking and he looked as if he were rich. [...] She had made up her mind and already plans were hatching themselves beneath her yellow hair'.<sup>493</sup> The reference to Dorothy's 'yellow hair' is a deliberate racial contrast. Abdullah's racial identity is specifically stated in terms of a judgement on the exact shade of his skin when Dorothy informs her mother that: 'There's a fair-darkie come to ask about rooms' (AHTS 58). The term 'fair' modifies the term 'darkie' to indicate that Abdullah is not 'black'. Hukk reinforces that Abdullah's lighter skin elevates him in Dorothy's perception in a later conversation between Dorothy and her fiancé Jim about the new boarder: Jim states emphatically that he doesn't like 'those black chaps', to which Dorothy responds, 'He's not black, he's brown and a good deal better looking than you' (AHTS 65).

Dorothy's motivations towards Abdullah as a potential marriage partner are similar to those expressed by Lola's mother in *The Confessions of a Princess*, Dorothy wants to escape from her impoverished home life of domestic drudgery: 'to get out, to do as little housework as possible' (AHTS 86). Abdullah feels trapped by a 'death sentence' in the 'prison cell' of his room, but the boarding house also imprisons the women within an interminable daily round of domesticity. Hukk's narrative shows Mrs Brown spatially confined to the kitchen, rarely venturing outside apart from to clean other parts of the house. Hukk provides little insight into Mrs Brown's interiority: she is cast as bitter towards her daughter and resentful of any attempts Dorothy makes to escape from the confines of the house. The interior space of the boarding house with its rented rooms

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<sup>493</sup> Jane Hukk, *Abdullah and His Two Strings* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1927), p. 62. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with AHTS.

segregated off from the spaces used by the family seems to encourage not only isolation, but also secrecy. When Dorothy plans to neglect the housework in order to visit her fiancé Jim, Mrs Brown insists she stay and finish her work in the house, forcing Dorothy to meet Jim and, later, Abdullah in secret. Abdullah also has his own secret: a wife and child in India.

Images of sexuality and domesticity are represented as conflated in Dorothy's mind. She dreams of being 'really rich', and having the lifestyle that would enable her to 'have a servant to do the housework, and send the washing to the laundry' (AHTS 86) and the eroticised figure of the Indian student fuels this fantasy. Just as the Indian's sexuality is subject to an orientalising gaze, so India becomes a similarly exotic place for Dorothy where servants will attend to her every need. The possibility of marriage to the Indian student is presented as the opportunity for social elevation that would have been impossible to arrange with a middle class British man.

A. Martin Wainwright has argued that it is class rather than race that is the 'filter' through which encounters between Indian and British people were mediated in the early twentieth century and this is borne out by Hukk's novel.<sup>494</sup> Hukk informs the reader that Abdullah 'looks quite a gentleman' (AHTS 59) and builds the relationship between Dorothy and Abdullah on a series of comparisons based on the perceived class differences between the working-class Jim and the affluent Indian student. Abdullah is described as having an 'educated voice' and there are frequent references to him having 'well-cut clothes' (AHTS 95). When Abdullah first meets Jim Jackson we are told he 'noticed that Mr Jackson glanced at him disapproving, but Abdullah's clothes were new, and well made, and the other's a little baggy, and he felt his superiority' (AHTS 70). Although Dorothy comments on Abdullah being 'good looking' and 'better looking' than her fiancé

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494A. Martin Wainwright, *The Better Class' of Indians: Social Rank, Imperial Identity, and South Asians in Britain, 1858-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 15.

(AHTS 62, 65), Hukk's narrative emphasises how much the cut of Abdullah's clothes contribute to Dorothy's perception:

Abdullah's boots glittered. They had patent leather toes and kid tops, and above the tops she could see a line of woven sock, and over the socks the shape of the well creased trousers set her thinking wildly. To have a husband who dressed like that! What else in the world could a poor girl wish for? (AHTS 98)

Abdullah's family in India are fairly affluent, and Abdullah has the economic advantage over Jim. Hukk highlights the connection between Abdullah's money and his skin colour in a scene where Abdullah presents Dorothy with an expensive evening dress that 'banished Jim from her memory and painted Abdullah white as snow' (AHTS 150). However, Hukk does not want the reader to forget that there is a colour difference here and her verbal portrait of Dorothy in the dress has the racial descriptors firmly in place: Dorothy becomes 'the white woman trembling beneath her gorgeous robes' and Abdullah suddenly transforms into 'the swarthy foreigner with his burning eyes, and coal black hair' (AHTS 153) who has her trapped in his gaze. The gift of the evening dress is symbolic of the couple's relationship; Abdullah buys her a dress that is out of place at working-class social gatherings. By buying Dorothy a dress that can never be worn without drawing unwanted attention, Abdullah is highlighting that their relationship is always doomed to be private and can never cross the threshold into public life.

It seems notable that the landladies portrayed in the novels and the historical documentation who sought to improve their social standing through the marriage of their daughters are always those of the working classes. For the middle-class, or aspiring middle-class, landlady the race of her boarders was of greater concern. In an analysis of the late 1930s survey mentioned previously about the acceptance of black students in lodgings, K. L. Little noted that the objections from the landladies had little to do with their assumptions about a black boarder's ability to pay, but was due to class determined social attitudes. A landlady wanting to portray herself and her establishment as

respectable and 'middle class' would want to maintain the social illusion that the visitors to her house were family friends rather than paying guests. She therefore looked for boarders who would fit in 'as closely as possible' with these aspirations. The refusal to take black boarders, Little argued, was 'an indication of his "undesirability" in middle class society'. Little also identified a spatial objection in relation to notions of middle-class respectability. Landladies of houses with shared spaces for their guests were less likely to take black guests than those who ran establishments without communal areas for interaction between the inhabitants, and 'the possibility of a socially "disapproved" person constituting a problem to the landlady is far less likely'.<sup>495</sup> The social standing of a boarding house could therefore be determined by the willingness of the landlady to take boarders of colour, reflecting the geographical distribution of higher numbers of lodging houses catering to black and Asian people within the poorer areas of London such as the South East. There were also higher numbers of landladies in Bloomsbury who were accustomed to taking boarders of all nationalities, due to the large numbers of foreign students who were at University College on Gower Street. Sara Blair has noted the presence of Ganendra Mohan Tagore, a professor of Hindu law at University College since the 1860s, who established a network for Hindu progressivism.<sup>496</sup>

Abdullah's family express their disapproval at his marriage by stopping his allowance. Without the money to support his new wife Abdullah must leave England or lose his class status: 'If I stay here and work as a waiter or something I'll be no longer a gentleman, and you, Dorothy, no longer a lady' (AHTS 222). Dorothy travels to India, severing ties with her own disapproving family. The couple move to Calcutta away from Abdullah's family. However, news that his son is dying causes Abdullah to return to

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<sup>495</sup> Little, p. 106.

<sup>496</sup> Blair, p. 823.

Delhi where Dorothy discovers the secret of Abdullah's wife and child and expresses her horror at his family home: 'I would rather own a stable' (AHTS 264).

On the death of his father, Abdullah makes the decision to return to live with his English wife, rather than to take up his role as head of his Indian family. Isolated geographically from his homeland, it could be argued that Abdullah had attempted to create plural homes for the plural identities he feels belonging to two cultures simultaneously, but under British law this plurality is not tolerated. Even to remain with his British wife in India, Abdullah must sacrifice both his existing Indian homes, the one belonging to him and his Indian wife and the one belonging to his extended Indian family, in order to create a new home with Dorothy that is free of any trace of his past. Hukk's moral at the end of the tale seems to be that while the marriage offers an exotic escape fantasy, it severs both characters from their family, and ultimately their own culture.

### **Race Mixing, Class Mixing, and the India Office**

Read as escapist fiction of romance and adventure by women who wanted a distraction from their poverty and single boarding house rooms, the novels offered an exotic fantasy that was not only about love and marriage, but was also an alternative domestic dream of a life waited on by servants and freed from drudgery. However despite being indistinguishable from other popular genre novels, these novels were not actually about escape; the authors were explicit in their moralising and adopted a sermonising tone to ensure that their readers were ultimately convinced that the personal cost of such an adventure was always the misery of becoming an outsider, excluded from family and society. Therefore, if the situation were to arise in reality, the women would be reminded that their current situation was always the most preferable in terms of societal acceptance and future happiness. These novels effectively worked as a controlling mechanism to keep unmarried white, working-class women in their class and race defined place.

The need to deter women from undertaking romantic adventures with men of colour seems to have become a national concern. By the 1930s there was increasing public anxiety that the high numbers of Indian students studying in Britain would mean more becoming romantically involved with British women. In October 1933 a debate took place on the letters pages of *The Times* following a letter from Ethel J. Shepard, Head Deaconess in Lahore. Shepard wanted ‘to call attention to a matter which is perhaps not understood in England as it should be – namely, the large number of marriages of British girls with Indian students’. Shepard was writing to warn British girls of the living conditions that awaited them in India. Despite their English education, Shepard claimed that ‘practically all these young men are unemployed’ and cited the example of an English woman who ‘has just died of tuberculosis owing to the appalling poverty in which she had to live’. She also warned that the husband’s family might not be aware of the existence of the British wife.<sup>497</sup> In reply, M. Arshad Husain of London, an author who was to write a book on India’s independence, agreed that ‘the differences of culture, race, and religion all conspire against the mixed marriage’, but he also pointed out that British women were not the naïve victims Shepard supposed and they not only ‘had full knowledge of the financial and social situation’ of their prospective husband but the marriage was often at their instigation. Husain stated the reason for this:

Most of the Indian students who come to England for studies belong to good families and, judged by Indian standards, they are fairly well off. But in England, owing to lack of opportunity and sometimes sheer prejudice, they are forced to mix with a class of people much below them. The boy is swept off his feet because he is not used to feminine society and the girl because she visualizes advantages which she would not have otherwise got.<sup>498</sup>

Husain’s reference to Indian students from ‘good families’ who were ‘forced to mix with a class of people much below them’ seems to suggest that his underlying concern was regarding different classes, rather than different races, remaining separate. Another

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<sup>497</sup> Ethel J. Shepard, ‘English Girls and Indian Students’, *The Times*, 6 October 1933, p. 13.

<sup>498</sup> M. Arshad Husain, ‘English Girls and Indian Students’, *The Times*, 10 October 1933, p. 15.

Anglo-Indian, Hussain Malik of London, replied a few days later, expressing outrage at the generalisation by both Shepard and Husain that mixed race marriages were doomed to failure. Malik suggested that the ‘few unhappy cases could be minimized if the Anglo-Indian community would be less hostile towards the English girls married to Indians’.<sup>499</sup> Malik seemed unaware in his letter of the complex class, power and gender issues in this opposition. The hostility that he referred to was primarily directed towards English women and the Anglo-Indian community seemed to have considered it more acceptable, or at least tolerable, for a white man to go to India and marry an Indian wife, but it disrupted the existing power relations for Indian men to return with a British wife, particularly if the British wife were of a class ‘much below’ her husband. While never being referred to explicitly, the complexities of this mix of gender, race, and social class pervaded the anxieties about race mixing.

Rehana Ahmed has drawn attention to the ways mixed-race relationships, in particular between the Indian men and English women residing in the working-class areas of East London, were perceived and constructed in interwar Britain and how these representations were produced out of a fear of racial mixing. Ahmed argued that the discourses of the period saw English women as either victims to polygamous Indian men, or as promiscuous aggressor to the newly arrived and naïve Indian.<sup>500</sup> These conflicting images of English women managed to be simultaneously represented, as Hukk’s novel demonstrated: Dorothy was the aggressor in pursuing a marriage with Abdullah, but also the victim of Abdullah’s polygamous desire.

Inserted in an India Office file, containing correspondence dated from 1934 to 1947 relating to marriages between women of British nationality and Indian Hindus or Muslims, is a cutting that appeared in the magazine *Answers* on 26 December 1936

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<sup>499</sup> Hussain Malik, ‘English Girls and Indian Students’, *The Times*, 13 October 1933, p. 10.

<sup>500</sup> Rehana Ahmed, “‘The Lure of the Coloured Man’: Representations of Mixed-Race Marriages in Interwar Britain’, conference paper given at *Bharat Britain: South Asians Making Britain, 1870-1950*, The British Library, London, 14 September 2010.

entitled ‘The Lure of the Coloured Man’.<sup>501</sup> This piece of journalism, written by Jane Doe (a common pseudonym for those who wish to remain anonymous), mirrors Hukk’s fictional account. It recounts the story of a war widow running a London boarding house ‘catering mainly for young male foreign students’ whose nineteen year-old daughter, Sylvia, falls in love with one of the Indian student boarders. Like Dorothy, Sylvia is attracted to the Indian student by his wealth and status and Doe describes him as: ‘A highly bred young scion of a rich-beyond-the-dreams-of-avarice family out in India’. However, the mother is unhappy with the proposed marriage between her daughter and her boarder and has elicited Doe’s assistance to convince Sylvia ‘she’s ruining her life’. This Doe accordingly does and writes her account in the style of a philanthropic warning: ‘it’s got all the facts that any girl contemplating making a similar mug of herself need know to bring her to her senses’.

The article is written in a similar sensationalist style to Hukk’s novel, with Doe intending her reader to engage in mutual outrage at the ‘tragedy for the mother and bogus romance for the daughter’. Even though she is writing nearly a decade later, Doe’s journalistic account makes use of the same racialised language as Hukk in her descriptions of the Indian student and his compelling sexuality:

The man was a particularly handsome, velvet-eyed Indian, with that melodious, highly-bred speaking voice which is peculiar to better-class Hindus. But what for Sylvia was much more devastating was the youth’s sex appeal! It was a brand of that perilously deadly form of animal magnetism which so easily ensnares impressionable female adolescents.

Kenneth Ballhatchet has argued that the British assumed Indian men were more ‘lascivious’ than British men, and the suspicions surrounding their perceived custom of

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<sup>501</sup> Jane Doe, ‘The Lure of the Coloured Man: Terrible Dangers of Bogus Romance Exposed’, *Answers*, 26 December 1936, p. 3. Cutting appears in *Marriages Between Women of British Nationality and Indian Hindus or Muslims*, (July 1934-July 1947), India Office Records L/PJ/8/714, The British Library, London. I am grateful to Rehana Ahmed for alerting me to this material.

polygamy ‘seemed to prove it’.<sup>502</sup> Doe draws on these assumptions, her article suggests that Sylvia has become bewitched by the overwhelming power of the Indian boarder’s sexuality: ‘Poor Sylvia. She wasn’t to be blamed. She was in the toils of a force that was stronger than herself’. The polygamous nature of the Indian is Doe’s first point against mixed marriages, she argues that Sylvia will only discover the existence of another wife when she travels to India with her new husband. Doe’s second point is formed in a section headed in bold ‘Brown Baby Tragedy’ in which she tells Sylvia about the ‘stares’ her mixed race baby will attract that will make her ‘a mass of nerves’, and the arranged marriage that her husband will insist upon for their children when they reach the age of ‘ten or twelve’. Doe then finishes with ‘proof’ of her allegations: the man has told the same tale to a previous widowed boarding house keeper and her daughter, and the man does indeed have ‘a little Hindu wife awaiting him in his home town’. Doe concludes with the statement that: ‘These damning facts did convince Sylvia’.

In making these arguments, Doe refers to the ‘department in the India Office [being] only too anxious to be of service to you if you wish to make inquiries about your prospective son-in-law’. This passage is highlighted in blue pencil in the copy in the India office file and an annotation in pen at the top of the page states: ‘Jane Doe seems to be an admirable person’.<sup>503</sup> The India Office seems to have taken on the role of guardian towards these British women. The Office received high levels of correspondence in the late thirties regarding the validity of marriages between British women and Indian men when the Indian man was subsequently discovered to have a wife in India, as well as requests from women and their worried relatives asking the India Office to ascertain if there had already been a marriage in India.<sup>504</sup> A typical example of this is found in a letter Mrs Audrey Singh wrote to the High Commissioner at the India Office on 25 May

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502 Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>503</sup> India Office Records L/PJ/8/714.

<sup>504</sup> India Office Records L/PJ/8/714.

1937. She had married Dongar Singh, a law student, at the Hendon registry office, London on 5 Feb 1937 and her new husband

sailed for India a week later alone, as his people would not send the money for my passage, not wishing me to accompany him there. At first he wrote every week telling me he would send money for my passage, but it is now two months since I heard from him [...] Unfortunately I am expecting a baby and cannot work at the time being [...] would you tell me what I should do.

A prime concern of The India Office was the welfare of the British woman should she discover only when in India that her new husband was already married. An internal memorandum of 25 October 1937, that appears to have been written in response to these letters and press coverage, follows in the file entitled 'Passports for British Women Travelling to India'. Written by Robert Vansittart of the India Office, the memorandum urged any applications from British women for passports for travel to India to be scrutinised 'to ensure that British women do not proceed to India in circumstances in which there is a strong possibility that they will become destitute there', for on marriage to an Indian man the British woman would lose their British nationality and would find it difficult to obtain assistance from the British consular.<sup>505</sup>

The British authorities were highly concerned with the prospects of mixed marriages and the potential children of such a union. Jane Garrity has argued that in the interwar period there was a conflation between women's sexual bodies and the nation, the white 'procreative female body was regarded as integral to the well-being of the nation and central to empire-building, key to conceptions of racial fitness and national stability'.<sup>506</sup> Concerns about the future of the nation were tied into interwar debates about racial purity and eugenics and the mixed marriage is portrayed as a political threat to domestic as well as racial stability in both India and Britain. Government anxiety towards mixed race children relates to the broader challenge of classification and the need to keep

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<sup>505</sup> India Office Records L/PJ/8/714.

<sup>506</sup> Jane Garrity, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 2.

differentiated groups within defined places. As Wainwright has argued: 'More than any other social action, interethnic marriage threatened their ordered view of an imperial society composed of multiple, yet discrete, ethnic communities'.<sup>507</sup> The need to keep these multiple communities separate also relates back to the much wider issue of class as the lens through which racial relationships were mediated. White working-class women marrying Indian men threatened the class structure not only within Britain, but also on an imperial scale.

### **The Centre and the Periphery**

To conclude this section, I would like to consider how the boarding house community could provide a way of re-examining the spatial politics of notions of the centre and the periphery. In seeming to encourage this decline in morality, the boarding house, that other threat to domestic stability, appears to dominate these accounts. It seems interesting that a place already on the margins of culturally established constructs of home was to be targeted as a dangerous place for bringing together white women and Indian students.

Lahiri has argued that the Indian student moved 'from the periphery to the heart of empire' when they came to study in England.<sup>508</sup> But while geographically the Indian student occupied a new position at the cartographic heart of the empire, they remained politically and socially far from the imperialist centre in terms of power and individual agency. Within the geography of this central metropolis the Indian student inhabited the marginal place of transient boarding house accommodation that was both temporally and spatially on the periphery. Indian students were tolerated politically and socially as long as they remained within geographic and architectural boundaries within the city.

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<sup>507</sup> Wainwright, p. 217.

<sup>508</sup> Lahiri, p. xii.

Containing Indian students within a controlled space on the margins could be viewed as a strategic attempt to enforce racial and class boundaries within the nation.

Shields has described ‘marginal places’ as ‘not necessarily on geographical peripheries but, first and foremost, they have been placed on the periphery of cultural systems of space in which places are ranked relative to each other’.<sup>509</sup> These places are not the elite centres of the empire, although geographically they form part of that centre, instead they are on the periphery in relation to social and cultural norms of that centre. The women who run these boarding house spaces must also operate from a marginal position on the periphery of British life and the final section of this chapter will develop further the idea that the boarding house was a ‘melting pot’ of nationalities for those newly arrived in Britain and how the boarding house can be read as a way of containing the outsider or ‘other’.

#### 4.4 Virginia Woolf, *The Years*: The Boarding House as Space of the ‘Other’

The ‘Other’ is always and continuously a threat to the security and integrity of those who share a common home.

David Morely, Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity*<sup>510</sup>

One of the many working titles for Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Years* (1937) was *Other People’s Houses* and, indeed, a striking aspect of the narrative is the representation of living spaces, in particular women’s living spaces, from the Pargiters’ grand family home to the slum housing of Colonel Pargiter’s mistress Mira and the run-down lodgings of Delia, Maggie, Sara, and the servant Crosby.<sup>511</sup> Woolf’s novel is an appropriate one on which to conclude because of its use of the boarding house genre to document the history of women’s experiences in the 1930s. It makes the vital connection between the wider

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<sup>509</sup> Shields, p. 3.

<sup>510</sup> David Morley and Kevin Robins, *Spaces of Identity: Global Media, Electronic Landscapes and Cultural Boundaries* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 89.

<sup>511</sup> This is first mentioned in Woolf’s diary entry for 22 August 1935, in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume IV, p. 335.

cultural, economic, and political situation of the period and the implications for women and their accommodation. This section will consider Woolf's depictions of the alternative domestic spaces occupied by single women and examine how conceptions of the 'other' and 'foreignness' can become mapped onto the boarding house.

*The Years* was a departure for Woolf from the more abstract modernist writing she had been perfecting in her earlier novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). In this later work Woolf is concerned with history and social change, and the need to present an alternative history to that which only documents the 'lives of great men'.<sup>512</sup> *The Years* is a product of the specific cultural and social transformations of the 1930s. From January 1931 when she first conceived the idea of writing a sequel to *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf gathered three scrapbooks full of cuttings and quotations covering every aspect of women's experiences from employment, education, marriage, childbirth and abortion, to the suffrage movement and broader issues of religion and war. Brenda Silver has described this collection of material, which would form the basis of *The Years* (1937) and *Three Guineas* (1938), as 'an important contribution to the social history of the thirties', and certainly what makes *The Years* such a unique text is the use of this historical material within the literary narrative.<sup>513</sup>

*The Years* went through several incarnations before reaching its published form. It began life as an essay intended to continue from Woolf's earlier lecture 'Professions for Women', given in 1931, and to be 'about the sexual life of women'.<sup>514</sup> It then evolved into *The Pargiters* in 1932, an 'essay-novel' that was a hybrid between a realistic novel and a series of fictionalised essays addressed to young women. Woolf removed the dominant aspects of the authorial lecture from the final draft (these sections became the

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<sup>512</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 121.

<sup>513</sup> Brenda R. Silver, *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 24.

<sup>514</sup> Virginia Woolf, '20 January 1931' in *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume IV*, p. 6.

basis of *Three Guineas*) and the fictional chronicle of the lives of the extended Pargiter family from 1880 through to the present day in the 1930s was preserved and eventually renamed *The Years*.

Despite cutting the essay parts, the novel retains much of the hybrid form of its original incarnation as an essay-novel, thus creating a new form of literary expression that contains an explicit social and political message. The underlying premise of the original essay remained as Woolf incorporated her thoughts on the changing position of women from the nineteenth to the twentieth century into the Pargiters' history, tracing the increasing freedom of the female characters as they move from their oppressive Victorian home in Abercorn Terrace to an independent 'room of one's own'.

In documenting this relocation to freedom, Woolf's narrative is acutely conscious of the social as well as the economic implications for women of their increasing independence. Colonel Abel Pargiter and his brother Sir Digby are the patriarchs of their affluent upper-middle-class families, but when their daughters Delia and Sara move out to live alone Woolf portrays the stark contrast of the poverty of their lodgings with the comfortable home they have left behind. In the 1891 section of the novel Eleanor makes an impulsive visit to her sister Delia, but although she knows the location of her sister's room and has clearly visited before, Woolf conveys in this short scene the impression that Eleanor is seeing her surroundings anew. From within the hansom cab Eleanor observes that the streets she is being driven through are 'not only poor, she thought, but vicious. Here was the vice, the obscenity, the reality of London'. Woolf situates the undesirable nature of Delia's residence through Eleanor's fears: 'The whole neighbourhood seemed to her foreign and sinister'.<sup>515</sup>

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<sup>515</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (1937; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 110. Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text prefixed with Y.

The novel draws attention to changing social structures as Woolf emphasises the contrast between the spacious family house that Eleanor has left, and the sub-divided one she is visiting. The remnants of a former family home remain in ‘the old Queen Anne doorway with its heavy carved eyebrow’ and in the ‘carved banisters, that seemed to have been degraded from their past dignity’. The changed status of the building can be seen in the ‘six or seven bells. Names were written over them, sometimes only on visiting-cards’ (Y 110). Delia is out, so Woolf depicts her lodgings as experienced entirely through Eleanor. Eleanor looks at the exterior of her sister’s accommodation, the communal main door and stairwell, the locked door to her single room, from the perspective of an outsider:

She guessed at the life that went on behind those thick yellow curtains. This was the purlieus in which her sister lived, she thought, turning; she must often come back this way at night alone (Y 111).

Eleanor’s reference to walking the streets alone at night recalls the scene in the 1880 section where Eleanor’s sister Rose, then aged ten, encounters a man exposing himself in the street. Eleanor’s fear of the unknown world of the city at night extends to the unfamiliar life of living alone behind ‘those thick yellow curtains’. Eleanor is the only daughter remaining at home to care for their father and must wait until the death of Colonel Pargiter to release her from the patriarchal confines of Abercorn Terrace. At this moment in the novel, Woolf shows how Delia’s geographical location is as alien and ‘foreign’ to Eleanor as Delia’s particular way of life and her freedom.

By the 1910 section of the novel Delia is no longer single and has ‘married an Irishman’ (Y 160). However Rose, the youngest of Abel Pargiter’s daughters, remains unmarried in her forties: ‘They used to say, why don’t you marry? [...] But not any longer’ (Y 154). Rose has instead chosen a life of action, she has been a suffragette and briefly imprisoned. On a visit to her cousins Maggie and Sara, who have taken rooms together after the death of their parents, Woolf has Rose reflect on the experience of

living away from home: ‘I never liked being at home [...] I liked being on my own much better’ (Y 163). However, although Rose may have escaped the oppressive domesticity of Abercorn Terrace, the large family home of her childhood is still the norm against which she measures and defines her perceptions of people and their living spaces, reflecting the Bachelardian assertion that the childhood home is ‘our first universe’ (PS 4). Rose says of her family ‘What could be more ordinary? [...] A large family living in a large house’ (Y 161). The single room becomes the ‘other’ against which the representation of the family home is maintained, but it is clear from the way the rooms of Maggie and Sara are represented that while Rose considered her experience living away from the ‘ordinary’ family home as a chance of freedom, for Maggie and Sara the room has a different meaning:

They were poor, Rose thought, glancing round her. That was why they had chosen this house to live in – because it was cheap. They cooked their own food – Sally had gone into the kitchen to make coffee (Y 162).

Woolf uses subtle indicators of reduced circumstances in this section: the lack of servants and Sara’s need to make her own coffee, the sewing machine in the corner that suggests dressmaking rather than leisured embroidery. In the portrayal of Rose’s shocked awareness of her cousins’ poverty Woolf implies that despite leaving home, Rose has continued to maintain a higher standard of living, and financially has not yet been reduced to making her own food and clothes. The hardship of Maggie and Sara is also alluded to spatially by the location of their rooms on the top floor, the traditional site of the servant. They hear Rose mounting the stairs and asking for directions: ‘They heard a voice saying, “Still further up? On the very top?”’ (Y 157).

These rooms are as much a container of the women’s poverty as their unmarried status. What is particularly noticeable about Woolf’s depictions of these single rooms is that they are always described, and judgement is cast upon them, by someone other than the inhabitant; usually someone who is in a more affluent or secure social position. We

do not see the rooms through the eyes of Delia, Maggie, Sara or Colonel Pargiter's mistress, but through the eyes of those visiting them, those passing through these transient spaces even more fleetingly than the inhabitants. There is an ambivalent identification and distancing, as the narrator is simultaneously the insider and outsider; the lodgings are not described in a detached objective way, but subjectively mediated through the thoughts and speech of another character. As the representation of the inside is created from the outside, so the reader is also forced to occupy the liminal position between the two spaces. The primary effect of this narrative device is to silence the inhabitant, making them also an outsider in the text and within their own living space. Woolf depicts the interior of Maggie and Sara's room as viewed through Rose:

She wondered what had made her come. Everything was different from what she expected. The room was rather poverty-stricken; the carpet did not cover the floor. There was a sewing-machine in the corner [...] But there was a crimson-and-gilt chair; she recognised it with relief (Y 157-8).

It is Rose, not Maggie or Sara, who is described to the reader through Rose's reflections on their room. It is Rose who has the expectations and who notes the genteel impoverishment; her discomfort at the poverty of the room is relaxed only by the recognition of the familiar chair from her cousins' former family home.

### **'The Sounds Through the Thin Walls'**

These rooms are not only represented visually, they are represented aurally. One of the first questions Rose asks Maggie and Sara is: 'But don't you find it rather noisy?' (Y 158). Approaching his mistress's house, Colonel Pargiter is confronted with the sounds of the street where Mira lives: 'where the muffin man seemed always to be ringing his bell, where children screamed and hopped in and out of white chalk-marks on the pavement' (Y 6). Woolf uses this aural and visual motif of children playing in the street throughout the novel to represent working-class districts. Eleanor observes 'Children had chalked the pavement into squares' (Y 111) outside Delia's lodgings, and Rose hears

children through the open window in her cousins' shared room 'screaming in the road' before she observes them 'playing a game with chalk-marks on the pavement' (Y 164-5). North finds his conversation with Sara interrupted by the children 'screaming in the street below' (Y 298). These rooms are not the hermetically sealed domestic structures inhabited by the upper classes, like Abercorn Terrace where once the curtains have been drawn the 'world outside seemed thickly and entirely cut off' (Y 19), but porous spaces where the sounds of the street outside merge with the life inside the room.

This modern invasion of the public world on individual privacy is demonstrated profoundly in the Present Day section of the novel where Sara's boarding house room is represented through the perceptions of her younger half-cousin North. Sounds peripheral to the room permeate constantly:

the noise of London still bothered him. Against the dull background of traffic noises, of wheels turning and brakes squeaking, there rose near at hand the cry of a woman suddenly alarmed for her child; the monotonous cry of a man selling vegetables; and far away a barrel organ was playing (Y 301).

Woolf evokes the soundtrack of the city from within the room making the street noises part of the conversation between Sara and North, at times interrupting them, "And then -" she began again. But a great lorry came crashing down the street' (Y 303); and at other times prompting them to join in, Sara waves her fork in time to the trombone and sings along to it: 'we passed on the stair-r-r-r-s' (Y 304), the words of the song transporting the trombone player metaphorically into the house. The inability of Sara and North to communicate over the sounds of modern life is perhaps indicative of how in this physical space where an over intimate proximity is forced upon the inhabitants private conversation is almost impossible.

North's discomfort with the noise is not simply a contrast to the quietude he has recently enjoyed in Africa. Like Rose he has already judged the locale and noted the cheap dinginess of Sara's lodgings and is not comfortable in her living space.

“What a dirty,” he said, as he sat still in the car for a moment – here a woman crossed the street with a jug under her arm – “sordid,” he added, “low-down street to live in”. He [...] examined the names on the door. Names mounted one above another; here on a visiting-card, here engraved on brass – Foster; Abrahamson; Roberts; S. Pargiter was near the top, punched on a strip of aluminium (Y 294-5).

Woolf again draws attention to the sub-division of ‘what had once been a gentleman’s residence. The banisters were carved; but they had been daubed over with some cheap yellow varnish’ (Y 295). The word ‘cheap’ recurs as a prefix throughout North’s observations of the dinner arrangements in Sara’s room: ‘the cheap lodging-house tablecloth, already yellowed with some gravy stain’, ‘the cheap lodging-house crockery’ (Y 298) and ‘cheap lodging-house plates’ (Y 299). Sara’s name appears ‘near the top’ of the names indicating she occupies a cheaper room at the top of the house. North’s mental classification of Sara’s accommodation is confirmed with his unfinished sentence, ‘Why d’you always choose slums’ (Y 298).

North’s comment raises an important question in the text as to whether Sara lives in ‘slums’ because she is poor – as Rose had noted earlier on her visit to the rooms Sara shared with her sister Maggie – or whether she is making a statement, a conscious rejection of her bourgeois upbringing for an unconventional life, in much the same way the young Virginia and Vanessa Stephen did when they swapped life at Hyde Park Gate for the bohemianism of Bloomsbury.

Shirley Panken has argued that Sara is ‘the most outspoken, unconventional, rebellious and anarchistic’ of Woolf’s female characters in *The Years*, ‘who accepts her state of privation and loneliness in preference to conformity with societal verities’.<sup>516</sup> While Sara is certainly unconventional, she does not seem to be entirely accepting of her situation. Sara lacks power even within the limited space of her room, as demonstrated by her lack of authority over the single boarding house servant: ““The bells don’t ring,

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<sup>516</sup> Shirley Panken, *Virginia Woolf and the “Lust of Creation”: A Psychoanalytic Exploration* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 222.

and the taps don't run." She thumped on the floor. They waited. No one came' (Y 304). The restrictive confines of Sara's room are juxtaposed against the freedom of the children playing in the street. De Certeau would argue that the children transform the street into their personal space through the practice of playing, but Sara has no such power over the place she inhabits and is unable to transform the single room into a space of her own.

Woolf depicts Sara's agitation rather than acceptance at her forced proximity to other people within the house. Her room is continually invaded not only by the street outside, but also by the sounds from other people within the house. Because these sounds are already within the walls, their presence challenges any notions of individual privacy and becomes threatening. North is reciting a poem to Sara, Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden', when he becomes disturbed by a sound, this time from within the lodging house. The proximity of the sound makes him unable to determine if it was 'in the poem or outside of it' (Y 322). What follows is the most controversial scene in the novel:

"The Jew," she murmured.

"The Jew?" he said. They listened. He could hear quite distinctly now. Somebody was turning on taps; somebody was having a bath in the room opposite.

"The Jew having a bath," she said.

"The Jew having a bath?" he repeated.

"And tomorrow there'll be a line of grease round the bath," she said.

"Damn the Jew!" he exclaimed. The thought of a line of grease from a strange man's body on the bath next door disgusted him (Y 296).

The noise of Abrahamson, Sara's Jewish neighbour, taking a bath is a reminder that this is not a private space, the bathroom must be shared with strangers where encounters are made not with an individual person, but with the traces they leave behind. Abrahamson's 'line of grease' and 'hairs in the bath' (Y 322, 323), reinforces that Sara is not alone in this house and enables Woolf to highlight the reality of her poverty.

Described by David Bradshaw as a 'grotesque anti-Semitic exchange', this section of the novel for which Woolf has been both vilified and vindicated has been the focus of

the majority of scholarship on *The Years*.<sup>517</sup> Tracey Hargreaves has asserted that in this ‘troubling passage’ the Jew ‘appears to be both emblematic of patriarchy which excludes and puts a ring round the mind and symbolic of the poverty that necessitates entry into the competitive world in order to avoid him’.<sup>518</sup> Maren Tova Linett has taken this argument further claiming that: ‘From her initial drafts in 1934 through her final revisions, Woolf saw fit to associate Jewishness with the threat of intellectual slavery’.<sup>519</sup> These recent readings of Woolf’s metaphorical and symbolic use of the Jew to represent the world of money and patriarchy originate from the incoherent story that Sara tells North. Sara cannot escape her impoverished boarding house room with its lack of privacy and shared bath without money and Sara’s reaction to Abrahamson in her bath is to rush out of the house and attempt to get a job in a newspaper office. That she should be forced to do this, to join the ‘servile innumerable army of workers’ (Y 323) rather than choose her own life makes her furious with the system and the Jew who becomes its representative. North understands that Sara’s story ‘meant that she was poor; that she must earn her living’ (Y 325).

Although they were certainly never destitute, the Stephen family finances did suffer as a result of the move to Bloomsbury and medical costs incurred after Virginia’s nervous breakdown following her father’s death.<sup>520</sup> In letters to her friend Violet Dickinson in 1904 the young Virginia Stephen writes that: ‘The family coffers are low’

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<sup>517</sup> David Bradshaw, ‘Hyams Place: *The Years*, the Jews and the British Union of Fascists’ in *Women Writers of the 1930s: Gender, Politics and History*, ed. by Maroula Joannou, pp. 179-91 (p. 180). For further discussions of this scene see Hermione Lee, ‘Virginia Woolf and Offence’ in *The Art of Literary Biography*, ed. by John Batchelor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 129-50; Phyllis Lassner, ‘“The Milk of Our Mother’s Kindness has Ceased to Flow”: Virginia Woolf, Stevie Smith, and the Representation of the Jew’ in *Between “Race” and Culture: Representations of “the Jew” in English and American Literature*, ed. by Bryan Cheyette (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), pp. 129-44; Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 310; Tracey Hargreaves, ‘I Should Explain He Shares My Bath’: Art and Politics in *The Years*’, *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 50 (2001), 183-98; Maren Tova Linett, *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>518</sup> Hargreaves, pp. 183, 194.

<sup>519</sup> Linett, p. 55.

<sup>520</sup> Hermione Lee notes that the Stephen children had an inheritance from Leslie Stephen that would be the equivalent today of £350,000, see Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 215.

and they are 'greatly overdrawn' at the bank due to 'this idiotic illness, and I should be glad to write something which would pay for small extras'.<sup>521</sup> Virginia's entry into journalism was initially to secure additional income into the family. She recounts in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) that before she was left a legacy of 'five hundred pounds a year for ever' by her aunt in 1918,

I had made my living by cadging odd jobs from newspapers, by reporting a donkey show here or a wedding there; I had earned a few pounds by addressing envelopes, reading to old ladies, making artificial flowers, teaching the alphabet to small children.<sup>522</sup>

However, with the acquisition of a fixed income: 'Food, house and clothing are mine for ever. Therefore not merely do effort and labour cease, but also hatred and bitterness. I need not hate any man; he cannot hurt me'. Without the respite from labour that such a legacy would bequeath, Woolf's character Sara is unable to escape from the 'bitterness' of 'doing work that one did not wish to do, and to do it like a slave, flattering and fawning'.<sup>523</sup> Sara's tirade against the Jew who shares her bathroom is full of a similar hatred directed against the men who control her economic situation and her spatial agency, confining her to a single room and a shared bath. The fact Sara is still in the room suggests she must have decided not to take the job, but there is no evidence in the text to suggest that the job has been either accepted or declined. Sara's rejection of social norms and her unconventionality mean that a refusal to work despite having to continue sharing a bath with Abrahamson seem possible, but as a character Woolf does not portray Sara as a promising candidate for paid work.

Hargreaves has drawn attention to the fact that Sara is out of place in the text of *The Years*, 'as though she's in the wrong novel [...] she remains an isolated, poetic

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<sup>521</sup> Letters from Virginia Stephen to Violet Dickinson, 14 and 11 November 1904 in *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. I, pp. 156, 155.

<sup>522</sup> Woolf, *Room of One's Own*, p. 48.

<sup>523</sup> Woolf, *Room of One's Own*, pp. 49, 48.

voice'.<sup>524</sup> Sara is in fact depicted as an outsider from the start when Colonel Pargiter notes her 'very slight deformity that always made him uncomfortable. She had been dropped when she was a baby; one shoulder was slightly higher than the other; it made him feel squeamish' (Y 117). In her essay 'Strangers to Ourselves' (1991), Julia Kristeva has argued that: 'Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*'.<sup>525</sup> The boarding house became a way of both containing the outsider or 'other' and, through the proximity of shared space, forcing the inhabitants' into a confrontation with that other. Abrahamson is the only Jew in Sara's building, his name standing out against Foster, Roberts, and Pargiter, all names with medieval English heritage,<sup>526</sup> and this inclusion of foreignness within the shared building draws attention to the otherness of her living space, highlighting how, by being within the same building, Sara is an outsider as much as Abrahamson. His otherness draws attention to her own, as Kristeva states: 'the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode'.<sup>527</sup> For Sara, Abrahamson's presence unsettles her by making parallels to the ways in which her own situation is controlled by the 'otherness' of being a single woman.

The boarding house as a space for keeping the 'other' in place reflects a categorisation of urban space as inside or outside, that is less explicit than the well-known public and private divide. The spatial boundaries of the boarding house determine both insiders and outsiders and those 'outsiders' who do not belong within the socially and culturally established norms of domestic family life are forced to become insiders within a space that serves to contain and control their 'otherness' within defined architectural boundaries. This transforms the permeable boundaries of personal autonomy and choice,

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<sup>524</sup> Hargreaves, p. 188.

<sup>525</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Strangers to Ourselves' in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. by Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 264-94 (p. 274).

<sup>526</sup> The Internet Surname Database < <http://www.surnamedb.com> > [accessed 5 January 2011].

<sup>527</sup> Kristeva, p. 264.

into what Stephen Clingman has defined as the ‘hard’ or fixed boundaries of ‘enclosure and exclusion’, thus reinforcing the place of the outsider.<sup>528</sup>

Woolf uses the idea of the outsider to demonstrate inequality. She saw women as outsiders, excluded from taking an active role in political and public life by their gender. In *Three Guineas* (1938), Woolf implies that she considers all those denied access to authority, whether by class, race or religion, as part of the same battle for autonomy:

The whole iniquity of dictatorship, whether in Oxford or Cambridge, in Whitehall or Downing Street, against Jews or against women, in England, or in Germany, in Italy or in Spain is now apparent to you. But now we are fighting together.<sup>529</sup>

As someone who identifies herself as an outsider, ‘who has no right to speak’, Woolf advocates forming a ‘society of outsiders’, which would bring together women and Jews to challenge the rise of fascism.<sup>530</sup> In suggesting that those excluded from society should form an inclusive group Woolf is aware, as Merry M. Pawlowski has pointed out, that ‘this space “outside” is where women have always already been. The difference now resides in choice’.<sup>531</sup>

The boarding house becomes a way of symbolically organising ‘otherness’ within a literary text. In the space of the boarding house the ‘outsiders’ whom Woolf identifies – foreigners and women - are brought together but, as *The Years* makes clear, it is a specific type of woman, the unmarried and the impoverished, who is spatially confined by her single room.

The connections Woolf makes in *The Years* between women’s oppression, their economic position, and their housing makes this novel a major example of the boarding house genre this thesis has been discussing. Aligned with the developments in women’s

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<sup>528</sup> Stephen Clingman, *The Grammar of Identity: Transnational Fiction and the Nature of the Boundary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 23.

<sup>529</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 304.

<sup>530</sup> Woolf, *Three Guineas*, pp. 195, 315.

<sup>531</sup> Merry M. Pawlowski, ‘Towards a Feminist Theory of the State: Virginia Woolf and Wyndham Lewis on Art, Gender, and Politics’, in *Virginia Woolf and Fascism: Resisting the Dictators’ Seduction*, ed. by Merry M. Pawlowski (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 39-55 (p. 54).

writing of the nineteen thirties, the reworking of the domestic novel and the move towards more realistic accounts of women's experiences, Woolf's novel is also a product of the modernist movement. As Hermione Lee has observed, Woolf's writing was always explicitly 'radical' and 'subversive' and in the later novels 'her strategies of anti-authoritarian ridicule are an essential part of her modernism'.<sup>532</sup> However, unlike the work of writers such as Lehmann and Rhys, where the focus is on the women's individual experience of life in a single room, Woolf's novel has a more explicit social and political message. *The Years* is thus both a striking example of the boarding house narrative, and unique within this genre for identifying the causes of women's oppression and how their exclusion from cultural, political and economic life, their 'outsider' status, is reflected spatially in their accommodation.

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<sup>532</sup> Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 278.

## Conclusion

‘The structures that contain – or fail to contain – women are the houses in which they live’

Judith Fryer, *Felicitous Space*<sup>533</sup>

This thesis has explored what it meant to dwell as an unmarried woman in the nineteenth thirties in the transient spaces of boarding and lodging houses, in bed-sitting rooms, shared houses and in single rooms with other families. Within this sub-genre of the domestic novel, the boarding house became an integral part of the representation of the everyday life of the unmarried woman. By examining this setting through the lens of literature, history, and spatial theory, I have considered how the complex interactions within this space helped to shape class conventions and defined the types of relationship that were available to women. In addition, I have shown how the boarding house dweller and the boarding house as material space have been mutually implicated in imaginative representations.

The literature reveals the boarding house as a site where discussions about where women live, how they live and, by association, the type of women they might be intersect. By placing characters in the temporary rooms of the boarding house the authors can reflect on the liminal spaces that existed for women both socially and sexually. Respectability was assumed through the private family home and not the commercial enterprise of boarding and lodging. While women-only hostels functioned to contain the unmarried woman in much the same way as the nunnery traditionally had, the boarding and lodging house might put her in the company of other single men. One of the place-myths that became widely associated with the boarding house in the popular imagination was that it was a place of sexual and moral transgression.

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<sup>533</sup> Fryer, p. 64.

There was an additional way in which the boarding house could be labelled transgressive: it housed independent women who wanted to live, or try to live, on their own terms. The boarding house was perceived as dangerous because it ‘encouraged transience and discouraged domesticity’.<sup>534</sup> As a living space it was simultaneously progressive and marginal. In Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, Miriam finds independence and freedom in her boarding house and her ‘triumphant faithful latchkey’ (II, 325), while Cooper’s character Rhoda in *The New House* risks family disapproval when she contemplates leaving her mother and moving to a London boarding house. The boarding house and the shared flat or house were often places that enabled rich and fulfilling lives, and many women who chose to live together found love and companionship.

Nevertheless they were also places of uncertainty and insecurity. The tension in the boarding house narrative is between the boarding house as a space of freedom and a space of entrapment. At times it could be both: although her room in Mrs Bailey’s boarding house gives Miriam space to think, she often finds her living situation claustrophobic. Even Jean Rhys’s heroine Julia in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* whose room becomes a place of interment ‘like being buried alive’ (ALMM 75), still experiences a certain amount of comfort in her locked room: ‘when she was locked in her room – she felt safe’ (ALMM 9).

As Heidegger has argued, it is possible to inhabit a building without dwelling there; the ability to find freedom in these spaces was dependent on the ability of the women who lived there to make active choices about how and where to dwell. Choice is largely determined by economic agency: Lehmann’s character Olivia in *The Weather in the Streets* can choose her bohemian lifestyle in a bed-sitting room rather than remaining within the family house because, like Miriam, she has a job.

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<sup>534</sup> Wright, p. 38.

For Rhys's Anna and Julia, and Jameson's unnamed woman in *A Day Off*, housing choices are dependent on the men who provide them with the money in which to live. The other side of the place-myth of the sexually transgressive freedom of the boarding house was that it was a place of sexual disappointment. This is articulated in the imaginative literature in ambiguous ways, for although Rhys, Lehmann, Bowen, and Jameson all depict sexually active female characters, these relationships remain as transient as their living spaces and never lead to permanent husbands or homes. The disappointment is related to the desire for a home, as much as for a romantic partner. In *The Death of the Heart*, Portia suggests marriage to Major Blunt purely for the arrangement that they would both have a home: 'we could have a home; we would not have to live in a hotel' (DH 295). For many women, placing themselves outside societal expectations of marriage and the family was not a transgression they would want to make permanently: Bowen portrays the character Cecilia in *To the North* as willing to enter into an unhappy marriage, rather than remain single.

Part of the inequality to which Woolf draws attention in *The Years* is the shadowy aspect of women's housing and poverty. She does this by representing the restricted spaces women are forced to occupy if they are to achieve that elusive room of one's own. Woolf's awareness of the importance of place in *The Years*, which draws heavily on history, anticipates an assertion made more recently by Doreen Massey that 'The identity of places is very much bound up with the *histories* which are told of them, *how* those histories are told, and which history turns out to be dominant'.<sup>535</sup> The identity of the boarding house and how this relates to the identities of its female inhabitants are both intrinsically bound up with the histories that have been told of single women over several centuries.

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<sup>535</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Places and Their Past', *History Workshop Journal*, 39 (1995), 182-92 (p. 186).

The boarding house was a contained locale that represented a particular microcosm of society. James Wood recently described such settings as ‘closed worlds’, reduced spaces that ‘intensify the fictionality that made them’.<sup>536</sup> As a literary device the boarding house works on two very different levels in the thirties. In popular romance and detective genre fiction the boarding house is often a simple plot device, functioning as a dramatic location for a love or crime scene; while in the middlebrow and modernist women’s writing of the period, it is a very specific narrative device that enables particular expressions of women’s experience to be articulated. The boarding house room becomes a container for representing women’s consciousness, connecting the interior space with the character’s interiority.

I have suggested that the boarding house setting in women’s novels of the 1930s can be viewed as a heterotopia, constituted as ‘other’ in relation to the family home, it was a framework for taking characters out of the usual domestic environment. In the literature of the boarding house, not only does the novel become a site for representing women’s experiences that were usually on the periphery of traditional narratives, it also becomes a site for articulating issues of housing, homelessness, and the wider implications of women’s poverty and their economic situation. Liberated from the domestic sphere of the family home, their writing could represent the wider world. Thus, this sub-genre sees a more socially and politically aware literature emerge under the guise of the domestic.

In Bowen’s *To the North*, the prospect of homelessness for Emmeline is only a symbolic one, but for many women, without employment or family support the prospect was very real. As the debates in the early twentieth century demonstrated, there was an ongoing need for affordable housing for single women, and particularly for women over the age of thirty. Jameson describes in *A Day Off* how her unnamed, forty-six year old

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<sup>536</sup> James Wood, ‘Rite of Corruption’, *London Review of Books*, 21 October 2010, p. 13.

heroine has ‘less than ten shillings between her and – nothing’ (ADO 35) and will indeed become homeless without money.

As this study has also shown, the boarding house is a paradox: simultaneously a site of freedom and restriction. The boarding house room was not somewhere to which a woman could withdraw entirely from the world and the conventions of society, and any transgressions could only take place within this closed world. This recalls again the thoughts of Woolf’s heroine Katharine Hilbery in *Night and Day* (1919) about ‘The rules which should govern the behaviour of an unmarried woman’.<sup>537</sup> In all the novels examined here Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* is perhaps the one that goes the furthest in breaking with these conventions.

A distinctive contribution that this thesis makes to literary studies is to extend the study of public and private spaces, and the locations of the home and the street, to those in-between spaces of the boarding house and its particular domestic geography. Lefebvre has argued that ‘Private space is distinct from, but always connected with, public space’ (POS 166), and it is in the boarding house novel that these connections are most evident, as these spaces intertwine and overlap, becoming mutually dependent. Women’s literature of the period has been defined as either the domestic novel about home, or the more outwardly looking novel that engages with the city. These categories have also reflected divisions between the middlebrow and the modernist, and assumptions about the political and social engagement of the writer. This thesis illustrates how a more flexible definition of women’s interior spaces and the domestic worlds they inhabit is needed, which reflects the interaction with wider social and cultural systems.

The social and cultural context of boarding house literature written by women is particularly significant. It is connected to very specific historical moments, emerging at distinct points when women’s roles were transitioning or undergoing a period of change.

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<sup>537</sup> Woolf, *Night and Day*, p. 328.

Developing from the New Woman fiction of the *fin de siècle*, when women began using literary representation as a strategy for social change, it was established in the thirties as women negotiated their new freedoms outside the home with the prescribed domestic roles of wife and mother.<sup>538</sup> The boarding house setting was to emerge again in the late 1950s and 60s as women's roles once again went through a period of transition. By the 50s and 60s women were often living in larger friendship groups and the wider circle of female friends was starting to replace dependence on family networks. Muriel Spark's portrayal of the ways in which women negotiate independence and relationships in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963) is set in a London boarding house for young women and Spark was to resurrect the theme of 1950s London boarding houses in a later book *A Far Cry From Kensington* (1988).

The significant difference between the writing of the 50s and 60s and that of the 1930s, is that women living alone were not looked upon with the same moral opprobrium that their interwar counterparts had experienced. Although living alone had become socially and culturally normalised among young women, it was still considered a space of transition before marriage. There also remained strict moral codes governing the behaviour of the single woman. Lynne Reid Banks writes about the stigma of single motherhood in a Fulham boarding house for her heroine Jane Graham in *The L-Shaped Room* (1960).

Boarding and lodging was a significant feature of urban life and historians have placed the lodger as a normal part of many households in the twentieth century up until the 1960s.<sup>539</sup> After that period, literary representations of the boarding and lodging house world as a contemporary phenomenon largely disappear. Although shared housing and forms of lodging continue to exist, the boarding house as a living space has become an

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<sup>538</sup> Molly Youngkin, *Feminist Realism at the Fin de Siècle: The Influence of the Late-Victorian Woman's Press on the Development of the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>539</sup> Ravetz and Turkington, p. 3.

artefact of the past. It remains only as an alternative to the hotel or the bed and breakfast for short-term accommodation and seaside holidays, or as a temporary shelter for the homeless and those awaiting council housing. Richard Wall has argued that although the ‘incidence of boarding and lodging has declined [...] there are more instances of unrelated people, both students and others, and of both genders, sharing a dwelling without either marrying or forming a partnership’.<sup>540</sup> These changes in the organisation of private life have meant that transient living spaces have been replaced by more permanent homes as people often contemplate living alone for longer periods of time.

In considering the literature of the boarding house as a specific sub-genre, this thesis has demonstrated that there is no single version of the boarding house experience. The writers considered in these pages have all constructed very different boarding house worlds and these representations are always determined by class and economic agency, and further complicated by the intersection of race and nationality. This investigation of the boarding house as an alternative living space has suggested that there is a need to evolve a less oppositional binary between home and boarding house, to acknowledge that, despite the common place-myth, these spaces could also be homes.

These novels point to the fact that freedom is not an uncontested concept. It is something that must be negotiated and choices made. Demonstrating the complexities of how unmarried women lived in the nineteen thirties, either through choice or necessity, in a variety of alternative domestic dwelling spaces has been one of my central aims. The boarding house is a neglected space that this thesis has sought to insert into the wider history of women’s lives in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>540</sup> Richard Wall, ‘The Transformation of the European Family Across the Centuries’ in *Family History Revisited: Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Richard Wall, Tamara K. Hareven, and Josef Ehmer (Cranbury, NJ and London: Associated University Presses, 2001), pp. 217-41 (p. 232).

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