

Column for *Visi*, July 2012

‘One should never have a home.’

The traditional novel aims to settle its characters in a home in which to live happily ever after; but how viable is the ideal of the perfect home in an unsettled age?

In D.H. Lawrence’s great novel, *Women in Love*, the main character, Rupert Birkin, is talking to, or preaching at, his friend, Gerald: ‘One should avoid this *home* instinct. It’s not an instinct, it’s a habit of cowardliness. One should never have a *home*.’

Women in Love was written in 1916, that is, in the middle of the First World War, and Lawrence was reacting against the certainties and complacencies of the previous generation, with ‘the home instinct’ as his particular target. But his rebellion against Victorian-Edwardian domesticity was also a reaction against the novels of the nineteenth century, with, very often, a home-directed plot. Consider how many of these novels derive their names from the houses that feature in them: Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Dickens’s *Bleak House*, Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*, Forster’s *Howards End*. It’s as if the houses are more important than the people inhabiting them.

Not that the novelists bought uncritically into the domestic ethos. In *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens gives us a sardonic portrait of the nouveau riche family the Veneerings:

Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come in matting from the Pantehnicon, without a scratch upon him, French-polished to the crown of his head.

That was in the 1860’s, and no doubt, as this magazine demonstrates, the modern Veneerings favour steel and glass over veneer and French polish, and the latest four-by-four over a new carriage with new horses; but the Veneering ethos is alive and well and living in ... well, the house next-door to yours.

There is a whole thesis to be written about houses in fiction: human beings express themselves through the shells they construct, and are conditioned by the shells they choose for themselves. And the novel, which is the form that deals most exhaustively with human beings in their setting, needs to take these shells into account.

Writing this, I realise that few of my own characters have homes. The exception is the rather wimpish main character in *The Reluctant Passenger*, who has a Laura Ashley-ish house in Pinelands, which I arrange for a troop of baboons to invade. My other characters live, more often than not, in hotels. It's not a deliberate choice on my part, and I don't really have anything against having a home (I have a comfortable home of my own) but I seem to favour unsettled characters – outsiders or travellers, not quite vagrants but generally of no fixed abode. Perhaps I feel that once you're settled in a home there's no longer a story to be told about you (though that's demonstrably untrue: think of *Desperate Housewives*).

In my latest novel, however, one of my characters does own a substantial home, a luxurious apartment in Paris. This is my main character's first impression of it:

The room before him was a temple to perversity, its contents apparently selected with a connoisseur's eye for the most hideous productions of their time. The furniture was not identifiable as belonging to any particular period or style: it was a compendium of the mistakes of all the ages, from Regency chairs with Egyptian motifs to light Swedish 1950s tables, angular and attitudinal but flimsy. [...] The floor was covered with a rug in Day-Glo peppermint green and shocking pink, and the wallpaper seemed to have been scrawled over by a large demented child armed with a very big crayon. From the high ceiling, which was painted cerulean, was suspended a chandelier of yellow and blue crystals that tinkled in the breeze from the door.

That description is in fact a verbal rendering, with some adaptations, of a photograph of an interior by Kelly Wearstler, who seems to be the designer of choice among the Veneerings these days.

I'll leave the last word to Lawrence, or to his character, Birkin, once again sermonising:

'Houses and furniture and clothes, they are all terms of an old base world, a detestable society of man. And if you have a Tudor house and old, beautiful furniture, it is only the past perpetuated on top of you, horrible. And if you have a perfect modern house done for you by Poiret, it is something else perpetuated on

top of you. It is all horrible It is all possessions, possessions, bullying you and turning you into a generalisation.'

The paradox, of course, is that the more we strive to be unique and original, the more of a generalisation we are.