

## Re-entering the West Room: On the Power of Domestic Spaces

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In the rural west of Ireland, Arensberg and Kimball found that every farm house was possessed of a *west room* . . .

behind the hearth in the kitchen . . . [where] all the objects of sentimental value . . . are always kept: the religious pictures, the ceremonial objects brought in by the bride at marriage, and the bric-a-brac associated with the past members of the household. Where there is only one couple in the house, this room is reserved as a sort of parlor into which none but distinguished visitors are admitted. The family heirlooms are there, and, lining the walls along with religious pictures, there appear the photographs of the members of the family, especially the familiar daguerre-types of the last century. Whatever 'fine' pieces of furniture there may be, such as highboys, cabinets, brass candlesticks, are kept there, as are all the religious objects used when mass is celebrated in the house. All these objects are inalienable in the sense that the family parts with them only when it must. They descend from father to son with the house and the farm on which it stands (1940: 129).

Arensberg and Kimball's *Family and Community in Rural Ireland* is most often remembered as a paradigmatic functionalist account of the small farmers of County Clare, in the West of Ireland. However, in a manner unusual for that genre and period, they allowed an intriguingly important role for domestic spaces. In particular, the west room in the small farmer's cottage was not, by their account, only a backdrop, nor even simply a repository of valued objects, but a room that played a crucial role in the drama of domestic life at the moment when the household social system reproduced itself.

Though but a small portion of their text, Arensberg and Kimball's discussion of the west room sticks in our collective memory not only as an exercise in functionalist explanation, but also as a vivid detail in their portrait of rural Irish domesticity. The space, objects, and social drama of the west room serve to reinforce the centrality of household and "stem" family – for the inhabitants and for the readers. The room itself embodies structure and authority and brings these forces to aid in the process of social reproduction.

But consider the following passage, from Frank O'Connor's novel - also published in 1940 – *Dutch Interior*:

The rain had come in under the back door and there were some rags there to sop it up. The lamp was lowered, the fire covered, the clocks ticked loudly and he sweated profusely as he untied his laces; and for some reason the dim, airless kitchen, its walls crowded with pictures, the noisy clocks, the ornaments, the bolted doors, his mother's whips, all combined to give him the feeling that he had been shut off from life and was being physically suffocated, and it seemed to him that murderers must feel like this before they were driven to a crime: a claustrophobia which only violence could shatter. (O'Connor 1940: 99)

Here we have the dark side of domesticity, where the meaning of social and cultural constraint seems to owe more to Freud than to Durkheim. Patricide is here – as elsewhere in Irish literature – a lurking possibility, and in fact symbolically realized in the subsequent pages of the novel.

On the one hand, the novelist and the anthropologists seem to agree not only on the particular force of domesticity in Irish culture, but on the actual power of rooms. Both accounts raise the possibility that domestic spaces may be more than tableaux for the expression of cultural values, that some rooms have transformative power, of the sort we commonly associate with rites of passage. On the other hand, the respective authors reach very different conclusions about the precise character of the rooms they examine, and the psychological dynamic through which such power is exercised. In Arensberg and Kimball, the retiring Irish couple are materially aided in their role transition by the locus and objects that define their new dwelling space. There is at least the appearance of great stability. O'Connor's novel, furthermore, portrays not only the life cycle of a number of individuals, but also, if more subtly, the historical changes in the definition of class and the criteria of membership. In this realm too, rooms have a special power, but O'Connor's characters are more self-conscious, insecure, and/or troubled about the role of such places and things in the process of self-definition.

Are we dealing with a difference between literature and ethnography, authors' perspectives, or the rooms themselves – and hence their respective formations?

This speculative and exploratory essay was provoked by the consonance and dissonance of these two versions of Irish domesticity, as well as my own fieldwork experience in that country over two decades. The limited agreement of anthropologist and novelist suggests a consideration of the general proposition that rooms have power – as both a cultural and a theoretical belief. That task requires a reflexive intellectual and cultural history that examines the roots of our assumptions about the power of rooms and objects, and some attention to the divergence of literature and ethnography as modes of exploring and representing culture. On

the other hand, the specific contrast between Arensberg and Kimball's and O'Connor's rooms suggests an empirical question about rooms in 1930s Ireland. Here too, a historical approach may be necessary – one that notes the role of rooms in cultural change as well as in cultural reproduction. Any features of the dynamic identified in the Irish context, however, may well prove relevant outside that island.

### **Rooms, Objects, and Power**

The world of advertising clearly operates on the assumption that consumers believe that their selves are both expressed and formed through domestic spaces (as well as through their clothing and cars). Anthropology, however, has only recently explored this perspective. Thus Lawrence and Low posit the questions, among others: "How does society produce forms and the forms reproduce society? What roles do history and social institutions play in generating the built environment? What is the relationship between space and power?" (1990: 455). Amid this new flurry of interest in such questions (spurred at least in part by the character of postmodern architecture and discourse – and the influence of Foucault) it is perhaps worth asking why, despite Arensberg and Kimball's intriguing if brief glimpse, there was (and perhaps still is) so much truth in Amos Rapoport's complaint that "ethnographers have generally written relatively little about the built environment although they have probably observed much" (1976: 13)? I would say that the same is true for the "assembled environment," by which I refer to the objects with which domestic spaces are furnished or decorated.

In seeking the roots of this inattention, I am led to an important strain of the general dialectic in Western thought concerning the power of the built and assembled environment, which took its most obvious shape within a religious context. The rise of Catholicism as a system of belief and an institution through the Middle Ages was – on one level – based on the belief in (and hence reality of) the power of settings and things, from relics to cathedrals. This is particularly clear through the history of pilgrimage, beginning with the visits to saints' graves (see Brown 1981) and, later on, in the development – for example – of the series of Romanesque cathedrals, such as Vézelay in France, through which pilgrims passed on their way to Santiago de Compostela. There was a self-conscious notion of the power of ecclesiastical architecture not just to express devotion and faith, but to structure it. So too with the myriad religious objects – from relics and their containers, to the countless two- and three-dimensional images of holy personages and events.

All such images were instructional, but also understood to be powerful in their own right, exercising a direct effect on those who stood in faith before them. Even reactions to the abundance and richness of such architecture and objects – whether returns to simplicity or virulent iconoclasm – implicitly acknowledged the power

of that which they rejected. This consciousness is evident, for example, in the Cistercian reaction to Cluny: the resulting stark simplicity of the “built environment” of Fontenay was meant to impose an order and a sort of reflection on those who dwelt within. This dialectic continued through the ensuing centuries and became a central issue in the Protestant Reformation.

That Reformation (itself of course devised from subversive strands of Catholic thought), in its more radical forms, not only devalued ritual but, concomitantly, a belief in the transformative power of settings and objects. Further, this disenchantment of the material seemed to accentuate the power of reasoned discourse. Yet, as with earlier, Catholic, reactions, one wonders whether the rejection of the material was not also, in some measure, an acknowledgement of its power. Certainly, the self-conscious creators of the starkly simple hoped that a division of space and decoration would construct a social and psychological world. This is patently the case in the ecclesiastical architecture of many churches and sects, for example the Quakers, Baptists, or Presbyterians, but went further, extending into the mundane domestic environment with such groups as the Shakers, Amish, or Moravians. I have lived in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, a Moravian town in which the shape, function, and spatial relations of buildings erected to house the mid-eighteenth-century colony were believed to play an absolutely vital role in shaping compartment, social relations, and values. As in monastic settlements like Fontenay, the belief of the inmates that this was so perhaps had the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy. At least it would take an uncommonly inattentive or resistant individual to miss the builders’ intentions and to disregard the *regulation* that the buildings were meant to impose.

Secular enlightenment philosophy, developing from these Protestant roots that stressed empowered discourse, sought rational models for understanding and sometimes utilizing the ways in which the built environment – along with external stimuli generally – acted upon the individual. Hume (1962) and Hartley (1775), for example, were among the early authors of theories of “association” that specified a connection between individual mental process and the surrounding material world (see Abrams 1953). Certainly the rational/discourse model of architecture was taken furthest by the French architect Ledoux, whose royal salt works village in France amounts to an enlightenment monastery, and whose unrealized models – barrel-shaped barrel factories and so on – were rather extreme expressions of a developing philosophy of architectural power: *l’architecture parlante* (Ledoux 1983).

In the guise of what is now seen as “British early Romanticism” – in many ways a subtle shift rather than a radical departure from existing sensibilities – the same period (first half of the eighteenth century) also saw the development of a number of more popular theories that assumed that the built environment in particular not only provided the general framework for a sense of self, but actually

manipulated that consciousness through “associations”: “. . . the associational and the picturesque. Both were developed by theorists of the eighteenth century [Romantic Revival]. A building is clothed in the garb of a special style, because of the meditations which that style will rouse” (Pevsner 1968: 352).

This associational quality was mainly attributed to “important” architecture – ecclesiastical and other public buildings, and the homes and gardens of the very wealthy. In such contexts, the viewer was supposed to undergo a directed series of associations, a triggering of memory – or, as we might now add, a *construction* or *invention* of memory. But all this was understood to work mainly on the cognitive and conscious level. Over the ensuing decades, notions of the power of architecture followed the general shifts in the Romantic era toward an emphasis on the role of the emotions or *feelings*, rather than *ideas*, and drifted toward a notion of the unconscious. Memories and associations were, in this model, “evoked.” In this way, Romantics like Coleridge gendered their epistemology, following the stock opposition of “male instruction” versus “female influence.” It was a pervasive discourse, which, on the popular level, was increasingly concerned with the domestic.

By the 1830s, discussions of domesticity and society also were infused with a second strain of deterministic thought that assigned to the house’s physical setting and details the power to shape human character. Fully articulated by the 1830s, this ‘domestic environmentalism’ conflated moral guidance with the actual appearance and physical layout of the house and its contents (Grier 1988: 5).

This developing “theory” or world view was also particularly associated with the newly expanding and increasingly culturally dominant “middling classes” – themselves the experiencers of transition. Thus, while aristocrats probably did not think that the bourgeois could or should be transformed by entering their domestic spaces (more likely, they were to be put or kept in their place by the experience of disconnection), the middle class salon or parlor was typically expected to domesticate and civilize two sorts of savage: children and members of the working classes. Beyond the domestic, architecture in general was given a conscious role in both “improving” and controlling – once again, a gendered opposition. In private spaces, the role of such new rooms as the parlor (like the woman who presided over it) was to influence through the expression of an attractive world of values and decorum into which the initiate would be drawn and transformed. In public space, the role of such decidedly masculine structures as Egyptian revival prisons was to enclose and restrain, and of their symbols to distance and frighten.

Grier (1988) has provided a particularly penetrating and precise view of the ways in which this cultural formation operated in the United States, where the

focus was emphatically domestic. That is, the particular “built environment” that was given the task of producing and reproducing the culture was the middle-class parlor – which always existed in implicit opposition to its opposite, the working-class hovel and/or barroom. Just as the properly accoutred middle-class parlor was meant to “civilize” both children and the working class, so too would improper working-class domestic environments – where dirt and disorder reigned – encourage uncivilized social behavior. Accordingly, reformists wished to build the former and dismantle the latter. Thus, in addition to what Norbert Elias (1978, 1982) called the “Civilizing Process” (inherent in the building of new rooms), we have a “Civilizing Offensive” (Verrips 1987), which amounts to a cultural attack of one class on another, in this case via their domestic spaces. Not coincidentally, “environmentalism” as one aspect of this self-conscious plan of social control and transformation went along with the temperance movement in America (see, for example, Gusfield 1963; Johnson 1978): the attack on the saloon was not only because drink was served there, but because of the social disorder that automatically accompanied such built environments.

The cult of domesticity and the belief in the power of rooms to produce and reproduce middle-class civility no doubt reached a zenith in the cultural formation we call Victorian. In this period, domestic spaces and objects multiplied not only in numbers but in function. Activity-specific rooms and furniture (for example) served as physical templates for behavior. There were music rooms and sewing rooms, each with the right sort of tables, chairs, and compartment. Decoration also proliferated. In addition to their belief in the power of the rooms to make a middle class, the bourgeoisie may have been interested in the material objects as creators of a family and class memory that they lacked. Accordingly, a new parlor was filled with memory-evoking objects.

To return to the Catholic/Protestant contention on these matters, it is interesting to note the manner in which even such strongly Protestant areas as New England took to the use of “relics” like the ubiquitous floral collages rendered from the hair of the dear departed. More and more, the parlor became a sacred space – and by that token a powerful field for the “evocation of associations.”

The resemblance of all this to contemporary anthropological views of symbolism is more than coincidental. In all this, the Victorians – who most elaborated these theories – were structuralists and hermeneuticists both, and indeed verging toward a psychoanalytic perspective as well. Briefly, meaning was to be found both in structural opposition (nature/culture, female/male, soft/hard, etc.) and in the interpretive layers of personal and cultural associations inherent in generic and specific items – from Father’s favorite chair to the floral piece woven of the dear departed’s hair. Such meaning was transmitted through both conceptual and emotional paths, unconsciously as well as consciously. Finally, the recipient open to such “influence” was literally transformed by enough exposure. This theory –

in both its academic and popular varieties – can be found, explicitly and implicitly, throughout the nineteenth century and on both sides of the Atlantic. We find it in the promoters of new public (garden cemeteries, parks) and private (Gothic revival cottages) spaces. The laboring classes would be civilized and domesticated if their little dwellings could be properly laid out with a simple but decorated parlor and kept clean, and if the inmates could further imbibe not liquor but the softening effects of a stroll through the park.

This is not to say that the Victorian middle class invented this perspective. Many of the same oppositions and even associations can be found in European (and of course other) folk traditions. But the Victorians – both within the academy and then in popular discourse – consciously organized these notions into a theory of domestic power that could at once account for, authorize, and validate their own experience of cultural transformation, and, at the same time, provide a way of shaping and controlling the lower classes.

Such popular perspectives were also implicated in the development of social science in this period. As Elias argues (1982), the development of Romanticism in Germany can be understood as rooted in the particular position of the middle classes there, as can the notion of *Kultur*, which has occupied center stage in German social thought and, through its emigrants, American anthropology. It was not surprising that neither Marx nor Freud was ready to relinquish rooms and objects to the antiquarian. Whether as symbol or fetish, both allowed for a key (if sometimes undesirable) role of empowered objects in the life of the individual and the culture.

Ironically, however, social science in England and America developed in disregard of things (and bodies). As noted, the popular cult of domesticity there was very strong, and indeed both the Gothic revival and the theory of associations were first promulgated there. However, though the literati certainly retained a notion of the importance of rooms as emblems and producers of specific class behavior, developing social scientific thought seems to have been far more rooted in eighteenth-century rationalist, enlightenment, notions of mentality than nineteenth-century romantic ones.<sup>2</sup> Buildings, rooms, and objects were ignored in favor of an internalist and rationalist model of behavior. Malinowski’s *mittel-Europa* concern with objects and experience seems only to have spawned descriptive accounts of material culture among his students rather than explorations of their possible role in cultural and social reproduction. The dominant paradigm of the middle decades of the twentieth century, Radcliffe-Brownian structural functionalism, with which Arensberg’s work is generally (if inadequately) associated, was based largely on Durkheimian notions of how social systems operated. In general, functionalist ethnographies of the 1930s through 1960s did not assign either the built or the assembled environment a critical role in the social processes with which they were concerned. Behavior was produced by rules and values,

which, in turn, were internalized either mysteriously or by the effects of social action itself. The relegation of the material world to insignificance was not, however, a necessary element in the *Année Sociologique* program.

Maurice Halbwachs, a particularly gifted student of Durkheim, elaborated a general theoretical framework that might have supplied the basis for an ethnography of the built and assembled environment. Halbwachs' posthumously published *La Mémoire collective* (1950; translated into English as *The Collective Memory*, 1980) accorded a vital function to the built environment, in effect attempting to extend the Durkheimian program into the philosophic discourse on self – to show (in response to his other teacher, Bergson) that even the apparently internal and private realms of memory and identity were socially constructed. Halbwachs noted, in fact, that he was not the first to assign the material world a critical (we might say mediatory) function in the social construction of self: "Auguste Comte remarked that mental equilibrium was, first and foremost, due to the fact that the physical objects of our daily contact change little or not at all, providing us with an image of permanence and stability" (Halbwachs 1980: 129).

According to Halbwachs, social groups make spaces and buildings and arrange objects that serve not only to express cultural values but also to constitute the groups as such through time – not so much by means of the patterns of behavior learned in such settings (if only because this was not a central concern of a book treating collective memory) as through a series of collective representations of the group(s) as such – with each social group representing itself in its own material world (household, neighborhood, etc.). The later domination of Lévi-Strauss' mentalist model of culture no doubt stifled the further development of this perspective in France.

In England, subsequent analyses of social dramas – curiously enough, considering the source of the metaphor – paid relatively little attention to "setting" unless (as most notably in the case of Turner) the action was explicitly religious ritual. Halbwachs' work, and indeed the interpretive/symbolic side of the *Année* project, is otherwise detectable in England (before the 1960s) principally in the work of Evans-Pritchard, and later Mary Douglas, who developed experiential and structural approaches to the construction of meaning. Within this new discourse – at first of only limited impact on their compatriots – spaces and objects assumed real significance as symbols, and Romantic assumptions about the power of spaces and objects re-emerged, under the guise of novel anthropological theory.<sup>3</sup>

Yet the rise of interpretive anthropology still brought attention to objects mainly in the guise of religious symbols or things that worked like religious symbols – for example, political symbols. The mundane world of secular space and objects did receive occasional attention through the last several decades, but mainly as a three-dimensional semiotic restatement of an unchanging world view and social structure – Hicks' (1976) discussion of the Tetum house, for example, or Bourdieu's

(1977) famous account of the Kabyle dwelling. In such semiotic decodings there is little to suggest, however, that such spaces and objects – unless they are specifically religious – have the transforming power routinely ascribed to ritual. There is in the anthropological approach a curious symmetry with Victorian thought as discussed above. Protestant Victorians were willing to ascribe power to spaces and objects in secular settings – and less so in overtly religious contexts, where the dissonance between Catholic and Protestant assumptions about how religion worked was more obvious. Latter-day anthropologists, on the other hand, are happy to accord mysterious powers to religious things, but – until quite recently – less so to secular objects or spaces (Fernandez's (1986) and Gliseman's (1982) work, for example, are important exceptions).

As for literature, I have neither the space nor the expertise to explore here the differences among and development of novels through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It can be noted, however, that attention to rooms as class and, increasingly, psychological indices was perhaps an earmark of the nineteenth-century novel in the west. Rooms, and objects within them, are critical actors in the works of Balzac, Dickens, or Henry James. Even where they are critical of the material manifestation of class identity, such authors often assume that the individual – like Balzac's Pere Goriot, who fails to create himself by these means – reveals himself in the process. Which is to say that these novelists were working within the dominant world view of their time and class.

The Anglo-Irish writers of the period were no exception. In that tradition, the role of the house and room in the construction and maintenance of class behavior and identity – or its loss through material decay – is a central feature of what is typically called "the big house novel," as it is of the caricatures of the Irish peasantry, always pictured in a chaotic squalor that violates Victorian categories and sensibilities. In a phrase: "The pig in the parlor." As for the middle classes (slower to emerge and achieve dominance there than elsewhere in western Europe), Kate O'Brien's suggestively titled novel, *The Ante-Room*, opened up that territory.

### Irish Rooms

Which brings us back to the scenes of Irish domesticity with which we began this exploration. O'Connor's version of Irish life has much in common with Arensberg and Kimball's. While the novelist's account is of working- and lower-middle-class urban Cork rather than rural Clare, both works depict Irish society as consisting of a series of domestic boxes that contain, in all senses of the term, the people who live in them. Particular rooms achieve a palpable power as the material embodiments of the Father through the evocation of memories and emotions.

But the difference in the sentiments associated with that domesticity are striking. Arensberg and Kimball's characters seem to stick around from choice, while

O'Connor's – when as young men and women they attempt the Cork version of the *passagera* – are driven back by the force of gossip and the constant rain. Some of this difference can be attributed to the perspectives of the authors, not only as individuals, but as anthropologists and novelist respectively.

Even though they discuss historical transformations, Arensberg and Kimball's Ireland seems the very model of a stable, self-reproducing family and community social system. In that world, the “west room” seems to embody authority and status, and thus to find its ritual role in reproducing the social relations of what was apparently a stable social formation. In symbolic aid of this task, the important attributes of the room are its position (behind the hearth in the west end of the house) and the sacred and valued objects that decorate it. Here we have the nub of both a structural and a hermeneutical appreciation of the source of the power of the west room. The movement into the room can be taken as a ritual moment, whose sense and power derive from binary oppositions (east/west, etc.) and the trains of conscious, pre-conscious, and unconscious associations of the sacred objects. It is enough to make both Mary Douglas and Victor Turner, as well as all their Victorian forebears, happy.

But this nascent interpretive stance, potentially akin to O'Connor's literary perspective through a common ancestry in Romantic and Victorian culture, is still held captive to among the least ‘novelistic’ of social science theories, for in so far as dramatic narratives thrive on conflict, there was no more undramatic anthropological form than structural functionalism. Arensberg had learned it well, and so when he saw the potential for or the reality of “basic” conflict, he put it in its cyclic, holistic place: “Freud might illuminate us about the sort of conflicts such a human structure engenders, but he has little to say of the far more important, more apparent balance of emotional forces which it entails.” (Arensberg 1959: 59–60). Not surprisingly, while there are many “psychoanalytic” novels, there must be few structural-functionalist ones. As for O'Connor, one of his most famous stories was entitled, “My Oedipus Complex.” The same contrast can be drawn on the issue of class. For Arensberg and Kimball, the differences between large farmers, small farmers, and others amounted to another balanced system producing more harmony than conflict. For O'Connor, as for many other writers of social fiction, the same differences engendered internal as well as external conflict – born of insecurity and instability as much as of antagonism.

It might of course be argued, however, that the difference is simply one of rooms. That is to say, that the differences in class-consciousness and stability between rural west Clare and urban Cork gave rooms different roles and potentials in the two contexts. But was the family and community structure depicted in the ethnography as thoroughly and stably domestic as the authors implied? Arensberg and Kimball's description concentrates on the domestic setting – farm and farmhouse. Even communal gatherings are located there, whether in the collective labor

of cooing at harvest, or the meetings of the old men in *cúaird*. My own experience does not contradict this picture. I would, in fact, extend it by observing that the public institution most often visited and least described by Arensberg – the pub – is also curiously domestic in Ireland.

Contrary to foreign stereotypes, perhaps, most rural pubs are very quiet places, where men enter and leave for social visits with publican and patrons much as they do each other's homes. When referring to such “visits,” locals will use the same idiom used for visiting one another, “Which house were you in last night?” No matter what the official name of a pub, it is only referred to by that of the proprietor. Even when weekend musical entertainment brings larger and livelier crowds, comportment will follow a decorum developed in the good-natured competitive structure of the *oíche mór* – “big night” – in anyone's kitchen. Patrons treat one another as “guests” who need to be cajoled into performing.

Yet older descriptions and accounts of rural Ireland reveal a less isolated and contained and much less domesticated round of rural life. Only a few generations before Arensberg and Kimball's arrival, the predominant settlement pattern in the west was the *clachán*, a cluster of cottages with surrounding fragmented fields held in “rundale” tenure. Pilgrimage and pattern were frequent social holidays marked by revelry and conflict, where the crossroads was a frequent place of entertainment.

Through the course of the nineteenth century, two forces – the Protestant ascendancy in the guise of landlord or government, and the Catholic Church represented by Bishop and parish priest – conspired to drive all this social life inside, and into the separate boxes (houses or church) that defined the character of the activity in question. Whatever the religious difference between these two powerful regimes, they shared a belief in the Victorian cult of domesticity, in the civilizing and domesticating power of rooms.<sup>4</sup>

For the Protestant, “improving” landlord, the *clachán* or “cluster” of houses without clear and consolidated holdings were not only economically irrational, they were the seed of all social evil. Indeed, not surprisingly, landlord and British government rhetoric was reminiscent of the domestic moralism of the temperance movement in the United States. Both believed that the evils of drink were part and parcel of a specific type of sociability shaped by the “promiscuous confusion” of dwelling and settlement. By the mid-nineteenth century most *clacháns* had been dispersed and, helped along by the depredations of famine and immigration, had vacated the human landscape described by Arensberg and Kimball.

The Catholic Church, for its part, aimed its domesticating efforts at the wild social life beyond the home (see Taylor 1995). Outdoor religion was either eliminated or greatly reduced and controlled, and the church became the principal site of access to the divine. Beyond the church, the house was increasingly used as an extension of clerical control – and in the rural institution of “stations” was the

occasional site of a Mass performed for the household and neighbors. Drinking and associated behavior was also increasingly driven indoors – into the kitchens of *airneal* houses (local gathering spots) or finally into licensed public “houses” – the pubs. These changes came as the result of both inducement and threat. A certain domesticity was certainly held up as emblematic of civility, and achievable through the proper division and decoration of space and performance of associated activity. But if the warm glow of the domestic hearth attracted, it is also the case that a stiff offensiveness against outdoor and non-domesticated social life was promulgated. Like the ever-present downpour in O’Connor’s novel, the forces of social control drove the rural and urban Irishman and woman into their homes.

It is in this context that we need to view the power of the west room in the Irish home. If apparently stable, the social formation described by the anthropologists was in crucial respects quite recent, and the symbolic power of the west room – as the authors themselves imply – was not just evidence of the hold of traditional cultural symbols and values, but rather the product of the conjuncture of Victorian domestic civility and religiosity (embodied in many of the decorative objects kept there) and more ancient, chthonic notions of a charismatic landscape. Interestingly, given these symbolic emblems, this room was “behind the hearth” – a private space, whereas the values and relations of the egalitarian community were in the public kitchen. But this arrangement was not to last, for if the west room was a civilizing of sacred fairy space within the home, then the parlor was its eventual replacement for the true middle class – rural or urban – interposing itself between the private kitchen and the public outside.

Which brings us back to the lower-middle-class denizens of Cork described by O’Connor, who seem acutely conscious of the instability of their world and of their respective positions in it. In this more obviously fluctuating scene, house, rooms, and decor become crucial ways not only of displaying, but also of achieving class position. Consequently there is a self-conscious and thoroughly ambivalent attitude toward these elements of material culture: a lack of self-confidence in some cases, and a great sense of oppression in others. The more powerfully emblematic such rooms became, the more poignant was the failure to achieve them in their proper form. What kind of a parlor could you afford to make?

We can end with another suggestive image from O’Connor’s *Dutch Interior*, in the same home described above. The dominating but finally ineffectual father knows how to make a kitchen – the first room described above. But the parlor he knows he must have is beyond his ken. In it one son has contracted consumption and died, and the other, from whom we heard at the beginning of this chapter, has withdrawn from the very domesticity of which it should be emblematic:

It was a square, cold, damp box of a room papered in yellow with floral designs in red and green. On the mantelpiece one of his father’s favourite clocks tick-tocked noisily.

There were two high-backed armchairs upholstered in black leather – purchased second-hand – at either side of the fireplace, and a round, one-legged table with two dining-room chairs. There was a cheap red carpet, and in a bookcase along one wall were Ned’s books . . . Before settling down in this cold, lonesome room, Stevie put the candle behind him and looked out from under the blind (1940: xx).

The emotional power of the domestic space in this passage, as in those social science theories rooted in romanticism, is a function of self-consciousness. As Grier remarks in relation to the American version, “they must perceive the possibility of economic and social mobility to be real – that society is fluid, to some degree, without the restraints of ironclad castes” (Grier 1988: 20).

Perhaps the old couple moving into the west room were as aware as their counterparts in urban Cork of the power and insecurity of rooms and objects in a volatile world colored by class and familial conflict. For the tensions between father and son – and daughter – are perhaps even more characteristic of rural Irish literature. For a recent, and penetrating example I would cite the writing of John McGahern (see especially “The Gold Watch”).

In all the literary cases, the authors are depicting a world of which they have personal experience. Though it might be pointed out that their form of “representation” required the presence of conflict as much as functionalism required its absence, one cannot help but suspect that a sensitivity to both historical and personal context would have taken Arensberg and Kimball’s observations on the power of rooms further. My own experience – in the Irish field and elsewhere as well – convinces me that it is precisely those whom history – personal and/or collective – has made aware of change and conflict that most feel the power of rooms and their objects as anchors of memory and identity. Perhaps there is an element of the self-fulfilling prophecy in all that. Those who believe they are in a drama will learn their roles, and if the set is in the script, then it too will be expected to play its part.

## Notes

1. Abrams (1953) has an interesting discussion of the movement from Hartley and Hume to Mill and Coleridge. In the latter, “feelings” replace “ideas” as the key to memory association.
2. This is no doubt related to a certain lack of confidence in the romantic world view often detectable in Protestant England and America. In their writings on the transformative power of architecture or cemeteries, for example, English and American authors seemed to feel the need to include discursive instructions on just how the symbols were going to act on you, the visitor.
3. Could it be a coincidence that Turner, Evans-Pritchard, and Douglas were

- Catholics – and two of them converts? One must wonder about the depth of the cultural character of the Catholicism involved – at least as compared to traditions in Catholic countries. From the Oxford movement through Turner, we still encounter the convert's need for explicit instructions.
4. The "institutionalization" of rural Ireland through asylums and poor houses played a critical role as well (see Saris 1996).

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