

Whiteroom: Waiting Rooms of Youth and Age in Visual Art and Literature.

Bella Kerr, Swansea Metropolitan University, Swansea, UK

Abstract: The *whiteroom*, the sparse and solitary 'waiting room' of youth or later life will be examined through a consideration of two of Rachel Whiteread's works, with reference to literary examples by Charlotte Brontë, Willa Cather, and Margaret Atwood. The paper is drawn from wider practice-based and written research, which traces the connections between works by contemporary artists Louise Bourgeois, Rachel Whiteread and Tracy Emin, and novelists, including Virginia Woolf and Barbara Kingsolver in addition to those listed above, to reveal an ongoing and discernible history of ideas concerned with the depiction of domestic space. A series of spaces were identified for investigation: *House, Redrooms and Other Bedrooms, Whiteroom, Study, Glasshouse and Tent*. Connecting *Redrooms and Other Bedrooms* and *Whiteroom* is the notion of a continuum of rooms occupied from early childhood to old age, varying in colour with each stage of life. The *whiteroom*, a place of newfound freedom, emerges from the complexity of the family home and the warm hued rooms of childhood, and exists with a view of the *redrooms*. Usually a rented or borrowed room, marked with its own history, the solitude of the *whiteroom* is warmed by evidence of previous occupation.

Whiteroom: Waiting Rooms of Youth and Age in Visual Art and Literature.

The *whiteroom* is the small house or room of lone occupation, inhabited in youth as a first dwelling away from home, and in middle or old age as a retreat from domesticity or perhaps life itself. It is to be found in the work of a number visual artists, most notably Gwen John, and is so ubiquitous in literature that one rarely reads a novel without a glimpse of it. This paper will seek to identify the key features of this space, through a consideration of Rachel Whiteread's works *Ghost* of 1990, and *Untitled (Room)* of 1993, with reference to literary examples including the work of Charlotte Brontë, Willa Cather, and Margaret Atwood. The *whiteroom* can be identified as part of a continuum of spaces occupied from early childhood to old age, varying in colour with each stage in life, from the intensely red rooms of infancy, through the natural tones found in the attics of childhood and adolescence, to the white waiting rooms of early adult life, the rich crimson of the marital bedroom, and the pale rooms of old age.

In visual art Louise Bourgeois' *Red Rooms*, comprising two 'cells' *Parent* and *Child*, encompasses, as Stuart Morgan notes, the "carnal and innocent"¹ and in many details echoes the best known of *redrooms*, Brontë's in *Jane Eyre*². Emerging from the warmth of the family home and the warm hued rooms of childhood, found, for example, in the children's retreats in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, the *whiteroom* remembers these spaces, or awaits the *redroom* - tinted in memory or anticipation.

The used quality of the *whiteroom* is characteristic; often shabby or sparsely furnished and marked with its own history, the solitude of dwelling in this space is fortified and warmed by the presence of others in these remnants. A place of solitude and calm, it has the dual association of refuge and cell. For some, in literature, art or life, this is a space of loss, but for many the attendant sense of freedom more than compensates the displacement from family life.

Often located in a city or town, many *whiterooms* signal a newfound independence, extended through the anonymity of city life, permitting a connection to society without scrutiny. In each of the examples this expression of autonomy seems to provide both a comment on contemporary realities for women, the current phase of the women's movement and a reflection of the personal history of the artist or writer. Whiteread's practice emerged from the recent peak of Feminism in the 70s, and its transition into Post-Feminism in the 80s, and an increased acceptance of the validity of women's work of all sorts - while much of her work is, by her own description, autobiographical.

As Patrick Elliott notes: "When Whiteread made *Ghost*, it was no accident that she selected a derelict house in Archway Road, North London, close to the place where she grew up..."³

While Whiteread herself has stated that she wished to: "...create a mausoleum of my past and also something to which others could relate – like the room in the Victorian house where I was born."⁴



Fig. 1 Rachel Whiteread. *Ghost*. 1990. Plaster.
© Rachel Whiteread.

Ghost was cast in sections from the interior of the house, the blocks restacked for exhibition to form an indexical transposition of the room shape. The door and window are evident, but neither here nor anywhere else can we gain access to the interior, which has been replaced by what appears to be a dense, physical manifestation of space. Although the plaster of *Ghost*, a permanent monument to a temporary state, appears solid, it is more fragile than the concrete of Whiteread's later work *House* (1993). Vulnerability and the possibility of fracture are qualities of plaster.

As a material to cast in it is delicately responsive to surface and detail, and seems to provide an embodiment of Walter Benjamin's thoughts on the domestic interior: "To live means to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasised. An abundance of covers and protectors and cases is devised, on which the traces of objects and everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior."⁵

Though this mass is an inverted image of its original, the nature of that original space is instantly familiar. Here is the authentic home that Victorian architecture represents for many, remembered from personal history, and since the nineteenth century synonymous with the family, the house indicating, through its spatial arrangement, the moral and practical rules of

the household. As John Burnett states: "If the Victorian house served, first, as a reassurance of social status, an equally important function was to represent the middle-class ideal of home and family life."⁶

At first Whiteread's work appears to be a form of documentary, mediated only by her chosen process, but *Untitled (Room)*, made after a period in Germany, away from friends, family and home, does not document an existing space. Cast, like *Ghost*, in sections, the only indentations are the inversions of a skirting board, window and planar door. This is, in one way, a purely conceptual space referring to a condition of being or state of mind.



Fig. 2 Rachel Whiteread *Untitled (Room)*. 1993.
© Rachel Whiteread.

The extreme starkness of its appearance defines it as un-homely, institutional and ambiguous, and echoes A.S. Byatt's image in her short story, *The Chinese Lobster*⁷, of the mental space in which only suicide is possible; a space from literature that, unlike the other examples, is purely metaphorical. Both are a step beyond the occupied spaces of narrative, whether autobiographical or fictional. Byatt's is completely devoid of even the memory of a door; a subjective space viewed from within; a place that one may be in, but may not leave. Whiteread's is an objective view of the closed, almost featureless room; the viewer is denied access and may only imagine the space it contains as either clogged solid with plaster or as a hollow, dark non-space. When Patrick Elliot compares Whiteread's casts he identifies two aspects of the *whiteroom*, commenting that *Untitled (Room)*, is "a stark, cell-like room, which makes *Ghost* look positively cosy by comparison."⁸

The *whiteroom* can be a safe space secured to live alone, to allow growth and contemplation, or the starker cell of enforced or self-imprisonment. Sometimes one becomes the other; some spaces are both. The calm solidity of Whiteread's monuments suggests stasis or time halted, whether for now or forever. Whiteread's intention in relation to *Ghost* was "to mummify the sense of silence in a room."⁹ The *whiteroom* is a place where the main activity is being; work may be done here but it is not a workroom. It is a place of change, allowing the occupant to withdraw and reflect - occupancy an indicator of already changed circumstances.

An issue that recurs with each example is to what extent the spaces described are metaphors of the physical or psychological. Whiteread herself makes frequent comparisons between the body and the house. Beatriz Colomina describes *House* as: "A body turned inside out for inspection."¹⁰ The focus of this paper, though, is the insistent frequency of the image of the *whiteroom*, across disciplines, and its role in the narratives of lives, fictional or otherwise.

In architecture there is a history of purpose-built housing providing for those outside the family unit, including philanthropic and public housing for single men and women, and student and sheltered accommodation. Each offers private space with greater or lesser access to shared facilities. However, an important aspect of many of the *whiterooms* examined here is their makeshift character: the spare room in the house of an older couple or of another family, the bed-sit in converted multiple occupant houses, a room in a shared student house. In these borrowed rooms, the memory of the family home lingers to increase the contrast between the state of the occupant and the supposed ideal of family life.

The literary examples selected reveal a number of *whiterooms* located in the continuum of subtly changing colours. Several of the examples in this paper have the warm yellow of shared children's quarters or a blush connected to the *redroom*.

In *Jane Eyre* Brontë provides the earliest and perhaps purest example. After fleeing Rochester, Jane collapses at the door of Moor House, and is rescued by the siblings who live there. In their company she finds something like the companionship of student life until she takes up her post as village schoolmistress and moves into her *whiteroom*¹¹. The walls are white, it has been furnished, in a plain style, by someone else, and Jane finds her solitary state both welcome and lonely; this is the essence of the *whiteroom*.

In *Villette* Brontë describes a similarly simple, solitary room, but it is in every detail richer, sweeter and more redolent of life and growth¹². At the end of the novel Lucy Snowe is living here, waiting for M. Paul, the man who has given her this room. It is a warmer, rosier version of the white waiting room, inhabited with the expectation of marriage in the near future.

The rooms Cather describes for Thea Kronberg in *The Song of the Lark* are also warm; the first a nest in her parents house, not yet fully separated from home¹³; the second the location for the start of a physical relationship with Fred, but also the place of her growing singing ability and knowledge of herself. She goes to the ancient cliff-city after living in a succession of lodgings, and as with her attic room, when she is in this snug room lined with blankets, she is again temporarily out of the bustle of life; she now has time to be¹⁴. Fred has given this room, these are his blankets; the room is on his land. But after finding out that he is already married, her relationship with Fred is deferred and she pursues a successful career as a singer, living again in an endless succession of hotel rooms.

Cather was never happy with *The Song of the Lark* and *Lucy Gayheart*, written sixteen years later in 1931, allowed her to revisit many of its themes in a more compact and controlled form. Lucy Gayheart's room¹⁵ allows her to be truly free, and while quite comfortable is made 'austere' by her encounters with Clement Sebastian. Until his death there is a continuing ambiguity regarding how available they are to each other, but he offers the possibility of a life lived fully. She works with Sebastian in his studio - the apartment consists of an entry hall, music room and 'sleeping-room', all well ordered and richly coloured¹⁶.

Lucy returns to her own room and has time to consider what she has seen, and compare it with her own circumstances: "...the rose-coloured blankets the valet was smoothing on the bed"¹⁷ contrast with the poverty of her little room in another part of town, but offer a view of a *redroom* from the isolation of the *whiteroom*, accentuating what it is not. The description, though, is puzzling: the rich red music room is the anteroom to the sleeping-room, with its neat, "faultless"¹⁸ bed and warm-coloured blankets. Sebastian is married but lives far from his wife; the studio is strongly coloured, but paling, as Sebastian's physical engagement with life diminishes¹⁹.

Old age brings a shrinking or reduction of all things - the body, possessions and mobility. In *Black Dogs* Ian McEwan describes the contrast between June's former house, huge and overflowing with things, and the "small white-walled room", occupied as she approaches death, where her life and possessions have been "boiled down, stripped away, to one free-standing bookcase, a tallboy of clothes she never wore, a steamer trunk"²⁰.

The third example of Cather's work is Henry Colbert's room in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, her last novel written in 1940, when she was old, ill and increasingly disillusioned. Henry and his wife Sapphira retreat from each other and the world as he struggles with the issue of slavery and she with her illness. This is the solitary room of old age, indicating the diminishing of a sexual relationship, and the reduction of the intense pleasures of sensory and physical experience²¹. The furniture is simple and the walls whitewashed, but unlike many of the other examples, the room's fittings and furnishings have been made for Henry, to his specifications. The room is further whitened by the daily dusting with flour, corresponding with Whiteroad's whitening of the concrete of *House* with 'Locrete', an additive used to mend the white cliffs of Dover, and with the whitened manifestation of space found in *Ghost* and *Untitled (Room)*.

The paler *whiterooms* are purified through their whiteness and most are only minimally ornamented. Mark Wigley suggests Alberti's instruction to finish the surface of a building with a final thin coat of fine, white plaster as "a mechanism of purification, a filter. Its unmarked surface screens off the bodily condition of the body (of the building) and yet reveals its formal order."²² The rooms tinted with warm yellows and pinks are also simply furnished and decorated, but suggest through colour and furnishings a degree of sensuality, associated with the memory of childhood, or the expectation of a sexual relationship - both recognitions of the physical self. It is significant that most of the rooms are not furnished by the occupant, and that several are supplied by men, in ambiguous guardian/teacher/suitor relationships to the female occupant. Housing these single, mobile women requires that their perceived natural sensuality and sexuality be controlled. As Wigley comments: "The risk of ornament is an impropriety in which the sensuality of the body confuses the mind that seeks to control it. As always, reason is threatened by the fantasized sexual mobility of the feminine."²³

St. John Rivers provides Jane Eyre with a house that is suitably austere for a woman with an unknown history, and a safe holding space until he can persuade her into a dutiful marriage. M. Paul houses Lucy Snowe in a room that will awaken her senses to an appropriate degree, but also contain her until marriage. Thea Kronberg achieves independence and sense of her own abilities, which as a singer are linked to her physical self, through her occupation of first the attic room and then the cliff-city.

The narrative contexts of these literary examples and the closed nature of Whiteread's pieces suggest that the giving of these spaces by others is part of a negotiation in which access is an issue. The history of men 'treating' women for sexual favours is long and varied and negotiations around the *whiteroom* can be read as part of this pattern, allowing a possible reading of the *whiteroom* as a metaphor for virginity. A reading more appropriate to this study is the *whiteroom* as the location of virginity or celibacy within a narrative context. The closed nature of the *whiteroom* is significant not only in relation to the isolation of its occupant, but also with reference to whom and how others may enter, if at all.

On his first visit to Jane Eyre's little house Rivers will not enter at all²⁴. In the second report of a visit he enters, but will not sit down. On the next visit, when Rivers comes to tell her that he knows her real identity, he enters, without knocking, from a howling snowstorm²⁵. Jane receives the house and teaching post as an opportunity for independence, in a world where marriage or teaching are the only options for women of her background and accepts it as an appropriate setting for her chosen retreat. Rivers, though, is looking for a wife to endure the life of a missionary and reads Jane's acceptance of the meagre house as an ability to live indefinitely without passion or physical pleasure.

Margaret Atwood has written several versions of the white room in a number of novels and in *Alias Grace* Grace's room in Kinnear's house has many recognisable features and prefigures her time in her prison cell²⁶. Again this bare, well-worn room, located far from the centre of the house, exists in relation to the richer bedrooms, sites of the sexual relationship between Kinnear and Nancy.

In her novel *The Robber Bride*, Roz's "girlish"²⁷ white bedroom, though designed for her, does not 'fit'. She is a mother, in early middle age - the image of her surrounded by the frills of girlhood is intentionally disturbing²⁸. This *whiteroom* denies physicality, in a space where the desired virginal state of an adolescent daughter might be displayed amongst repeated decorative details, prefiguring the wedding dress and cake. This room is more prison cell than passkey to freedom.

Middle age is the life stage most inappropriate to dwelling in the *whiteroom*, a time when women in particular are expected to be at the centre of a family home, an idea explored by Anne Tyler through her character, Delia, in *The Ladder of the Years*, who flees family and home to find the simplicity of the essential *whiteroom*²⁹.

Atwood describes another girlish room in the terrifying future of *The Handmaid's Tale*³⁰, housing a woman who had been at the centre of a family, now imprisoned in this *whiteroom*, located in a 'flesh-toned' family house; contained by it and yet separate³¹. Offred's slow exploration of the room, seeking the tiniest details, section by section, matches the delicacy of Whiteread's cast surfaces³². Whiteread's casting process softly invades every crevice and mark on the inner surface of the room, revealing the messages left behind by the process of dwelling. The apparent homeliness and normality of both *Ghost* and Offred's room contrast with an unyielding and perverse quality common to both. Each white interior is balanced for a short time in its pale isolation before the occupant moves on towards more intimate human relationships or death.

Ultimately, it may not be possible to ignore the metaphorical readings here - the reflections of both mental and physical states that resonate around descriptions and manifestations of the *whiteroom*, most particularly as an image of virginity or celibacy, with reference to notions of the house as female body or the structure of the house as an image of mind and body. Most of the examples selected have been produced by women, and most of the *whiteroom*'s occupants, implied or specified, are women. This bias has been guided, in the wider research from which *Whiteroom* is drawn, by a wish to reveal a history of the particularity of women's stories, reflected in literature and art through images of domestic space. The issues of women and the home are many layered and numerous, and the image of the *whiteroom* is clearly connected to the self-determinism, varying levels of separatism and the issues of control of domestic space proposed and examined at various periods of the women's movement.

But it must also be noted that Atwood and Cather have created *whiterooms* as a response to broader political issues of freedom and oppression – Atwood's alternative future in *The Handmaid's Tale* was a response to the activities of the Taliban in Afghanistan, while Cather's Henry Colbert struggles with the issue of slavery. The Taliban regime and that in Atwood's novel, are particularly oppressive of women, but these totalitarian societies removed freedom for all. Race and oppression are the issues of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. The choice of Whiteread as the maker of the *Holocaust Memorial*³³ in Vienna reflects the ability of her work to make similar comment. If we allow for broader readings of the *whiteroom* it can echo the issues of ghettoisation, the problems of political action and inaction, and the journey towards autonomy and freedom. It would seem that it is important in fiction, art and life for these reasons, offering an image of an independent state of self-realisation and personal emancipation over finite periods of time, with the concurrent suggestion that enforced or over-prolonged residence is at best dispiriting and at worst deadly.

In each manifestation the worn quality of these spaces is emphasised; the shabby surfaces evidence of their own histories. The solitude of dwelling in the *whiteroom* is softened by these dents and stains, evidence of others who have lived there before; "someone like me"³⁴ to accompany the inhabitant through even the worst experiences of this space. In youth or middle age the pause in life is temporary, and usually a positive experience, and the reminders of the tides of living that chip and mark interiors ease the return to the main flow of domestic life. In old age or depression the *whiteroom* may become more characteristic of the blank cell, indicating a diminishing connection to life. So that while *Ghost* both confounds with its monumental muteness, it also comforts with the delicacy and intimacy of the cast detail, while *Untitled (Room)* having no history indicates the unforgiving, comfortless cell, the bleakest version of the *whiteroom*.

Endnotes

¹ Morgan, S. (1995) 'Louise Bourgeois' in *Rites of Passage*, p57

² Brontë, C. (1847) *Jane Eyre*. p7

³ Elliott, P. (2001) 'Sculpting in Nothing: An Introduction to the Work of Rachel Whiteread', p11

⁴ Whiteread in Colomina, B. (2001) 'I Dreamt I was a Wall', p72

⁵ Benjamin, W (1978) 'Louis-Philippe, or the Interior', p155

-
- ⁶ Burnett, J. (1978) *A Social History of Housing 1815-1970*, p193
- ⁷ Byatt, A.S. (1994) 'The Chinese Lobster' p125
- ⁸ Elliot, P. (2001) 'Sculpting in Nothing: An Introduction to the Work of Rachel Whiteread', p13
- ⁹ Whiteread in Colomina, B. (2001) 'I Dreamt I was a Wall, p72
- ¹⁰ Colomina, B. (2001) 'I Dreamt I was a Wall, p74
- ¹¹ Brontë, C. (n/d /1847) *Jane Eyre*, p344
- ¹² Brontë, C. (2004 /1853) *Villette*, p534-535
- ¹³ Cather, W. (1982 /1915) *The Song of the Lark*, p70-71
- ¹⁴ Cather, W. (1982 /1915) *The Song of the Lark*, p372
- ¹⁵ Cather 1985 (1931) *Lucy Gayheart* p26-28
- ¹⁶ Cather, W. (1985 /1931) *Lucy Gayheart*, p44
- ¹⁷ Cather, W. (1985 /1931) *Lucy Gayheart*, p44
- ¹⁸ Cather, W. (1985 /1931) *Lucy Gayheart*, p44
- ¹⁹ Cather, W. (1985 /1931) *Lucy Gayheart*, p 77
- ²⁰ McEwan, I (1992) *Black Dogs*, p33/36
- ²¹ Cather, W. (1985 /1931) *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, p 47
- ²² On Alberti's fifteenth century treatise, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, Wigley, M. (1992) 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', p344.
- ²³ Wigley, M. (1992) 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', p344
- ²⁴ Brontë, C. (n/d /1847) *Jane Eyre*, p347
- ²⁵ Brontë, C. (n/d /1847) *Jane Eyre*, p362-363
- ²⁶ Atwood, M. (1996) *Alias Grace*, p253
- ²⁷ Atwood, M. (1993) *The Robber Bride*, p73
- ²⁸ Atwood, M. (1993) *The Robber Bride*, p73
- ²⁹ Tyler, A. (1982) *The Ladder of the Years*, p91
- ³⁰ Atwood, M. (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*, p17
- ³¹ Atwood, M. (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*, p18
- ³² Atwood, M. (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*, p60-62
- ³³ Whiteread's *Holocaust Memorial*, while not exactly matching the identified characteristics of the *whiteroom*, echoes the closed and immutable character of Whiteread's other rooms and the issues of access common to all the *whiterooms*
- ³⁴ Atwood, M. (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*, p60

References

- Atwood, Margaret. (1985). *The Handmaid's Tale*. Virago Press, London.
- Atwood, Margaret. (1993). *The Robber Bride*. Virago Press, London.
- Atwood, Margaret. (1996). *Alias Grace*. Virago Press, London.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1978) Louis-Philippe, or the Interior. In *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. Schocken Books, New York. pp154-156
- Brontë, Charlotte. (n/d /1847). *Jane Eyre*. Blackie and Son, London.
- Brontë, Charlotte. (2004/1853). *Villette*. Penguin Books, London.
- Burnett, John. (1978). *A Social History of Housing 1815-1970*. Methuen, London.
- Byatt, A. S. (1993). The Chinese Lobster. In *The Matisse Stories*. Vintage, London. pp93-134
- Cather, Willa. (1982 /1915). *The Song of the Lark*. Virago Press, London.
- Cather, Willa. (1985 /1931). *Lucy Gayheart*. Virago Press, London.

- Cather, Willa. (1986 /1940). *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Virago Press, London.
- Colomina, Beatriz. (2001) 'I Dreamt I Was a Wall' in *Rachel Whiteread: Transient Spaces*. Guggenheim Museum, New York. pp 71- 86
- Elliott, Patrick. (2001) 'Sculpting Nothing: An Introduction to the Work of Rachel Whiteread' in *Rachel Whiteread*. National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh / the Serpentine Gallery, London. pp9 – 15.
- Kerr, Bella. (2008) *Reading Rooms: Manifestations of Domestic Space in Visual Art and Literature*. MPhil, Swansea Metropolitan University, Swansea.
- McEwan, I. (1992) *Black Dogs*. Vintage, London.
- Morgan, Stuart. (1995) 'Louise Bourgeois' in *Rites of Passage, Art for the End of the Century*. Tate Gallery Publications, London. pp54 – 57.
- Tyler, Anne. 1996 (1982). *Ladder of the Years*. Vintage, London.
- Wigley, Mark. (1992) 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender' in *Sexuality and Space* (ed. Colomina, Beatriz). New York: Princeton Architectural Press. 327 – 389.
- Woolf, Virginia. (1990 /1927). *To the Lighthouse*. Vintage, London.