

Abstract

This thesis explores the ways selected American women writers utilize spatial imagery to convey their female characters' internal and external situation. In the introductory, theoretical chapter, attention is at first paid to the representation of space in literature. Drawing upon Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* and Marilyn R. Chandler's *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*, space is presented as playing a role equal to that of characters and plot since it is perceived as both a production shaped by its inhabitants and a force that is, in turn, shaping them. Furthermore, the difference between female and male spatial awareness as depicted in American fiction written both by men and women is scrutinized with the result that, arguably, male characters have a tendency to regard their houses as mere tokens of their social status, whereas female characters tend to have a more intimate and emotional relationship to their living space. This passage is inspired by Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Finally, it is argued that women characters tend to develop their personalities in respect to the space they inhabit, and that domestic space can be for them either a space of confinement (the section dealing with this phenomenon is based on Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*) or a free and safe *felicitous space*.

The body of this thesis consists of a close analysis of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's and Kate Chopin's short stories "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and "The Storm" (1898), Louise Erdrich's 1984 novel *Love Medicine* and Sandra Cisneros's novella *The House on Mango Street* (1984). The comparison of these works, written by female writers from various cultural and social backgrounds in a time span of more than a century, enables us to suggest that spatial settings seem to play an important role in women writers' conception of their female characters, no matter whether they write in the nineteenth or twentieth century. Nevertheless, considering the findings of this thesis, the question arises as to whether this notion is not more appealing and useful for ethnic rather than white writers nowadays. Finally, it may be inferred that in spite of a series of cultural, social, economical and legal changes that have occurred in the past decades the distinction between domestic space as entrapment and as *felicitous space*, discovered in the analyzed works, is (maybe surprisingly) still regarded as relevant even by contemporary women authors.