**“Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.” In relation to Woolf’s statement, explore the symbolism of ‘home’ in literature. Make reference to at least one example of prose and/or poetry written before 1928.**

One typically experiences a passionate repulsion to the image of a woman trapped in the home, to such an extent that our contemporary minds tend to dismiss the inevitable positivity that women inflicted on all that they had ever known. Despite a frustration experienced by some women, others, as it is explored in literature prior to 1928, radiated creativity and inspiration within those four walls.

Assuming that a woman’s place in the home is a negative notion, not once did we stop to consider that by constricting a woman’s creativity within such a small area, this could actually heighten its effectiveness. This creativity possesses the depth conveyed by Gilbert and Gubar: “every woman might seem to have metaphorical access to the dark knowledge buried in caves”[[1]](#footnote-1) but the negative connotations from “how does a woman distinguish what she is from what she sees, her real creative essence from the unreal cutpaper shadows…?”1 suggests a destructive force not represented in other texts. The argument suggests that this intensity has the ability to cloud one’s judgement.

However, this painful restriction could actually facilitate women to be more at ease and creative within their home, which is illustrated in “Mrs Dalloway”. Virginia Woolf has conveyed this concept through her character Clarissa whose intense creativity and focus on the home is demonstrated through the narrative structure of the novel. Concentrated entirely on a single day, which for Clarissa represents a build up to her party; Woolf portrays the way in which a home represents an appealing focus to the entertaining exploits of women. The limited use of speech marks for dialogue throughout the text places a greater emphasis on Clarissa’s repetitive plea: “Remember the party! Remember our party to-night!”[[2]](#footnote-2)  indicating how the home holds greater significance in her life than whatever her daughter may be doing beyond its walls. Moreover, the bounty of creativity which the home represents in literature is depicted through the importance placed on all elements of the party that Clarissa takes great pride in holding: “Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself”[[3]](#footnote-3). This transcendence comes with the image of a home. A power and greater influence comes to women as a result of this control of the home, thus generating this icon of female creative freedom.

Not only does the home represent a greater freedom of expression, but it also gives women more control within their marriage. It symbolises a place of common ground for women in multiple works of literature, most significantly within “Mrs Dalloway”. A progression of dominance is evident from the image of a home where the woman has greater control than the man. Beyond the domestic boundaries, the husband holds more influence and power, in contrast to life inside the walls. Woolf has portrayed one couple in “Mrs Dalloway” as encompassing such ideals, through an exploration of the husband’s behaviour in order to directly contrast it with that of the female. Lucrezia experiences isolation outside the home, claiming that “To love makes one solitary”[[4]](#footnote-4) ; this powerful statement starkly juxtaposes her behaviour at home. Rather than feeling restrained by her passions, within the comfort, ease and familiarity of her domestic realm, Lucrezia feels able to openly express and embrace her emotions. The description of confident behaviour arising from this newfound ability to express her hidden thoughts is conveyed through her likeness of a “flowering tree”[[5]](#footnote-5). The connotations of expression captured from this image of a proud symbol of nature willingly sharing all its secrets, as well as the openness and lack of fear, are heightened by the contrast in her behaviour to her husband who “flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Mrs. Filmer’s area railings”6. The passionate need to escape, emphasised through the consonance utilised, indirectly highlights the comfort females can feel from this enclosure feared by men.

Furthermore, the home acts as a symbol of the differences in behaviour between males and females. While to men, the idea of being trapped indoors sparks fears of imprisonment or less dramatically, boredom, to females it can cause them to feel more in control of their lives. Possibly, it is only in later texts such as “Mrs Dalloway” written by a female author, that one is truly able to witness the symbol of home through the female lens. Earlier texts including “Tess of the D’Urbervilles” portray the notion of home much more negatively. Hardy was writing from a male perspective, having never experienced the unique sensation of the female role in the home. A future as a married woman in her own household becomes an image of utmost fear for Tess who responds hysterically to such trepidation. The exclamation: ‘“To tell you that I have killed him!”’[[6]](#footnote-6) highlights the uncharacteristically violent behaviour adopted by Tess to avoid such circumstances. This juxtaposes Hardy’s depiction of his protagonist’s reaction to a home on realising the imminence of her death: ‘”All is trouble outside there; inside here content”’[[7]](#footnote-7). Whilst the dialogue consistencies enable an effective comparison, they also depict the home as a last resort, a final stop before heaven. The binaries of birth and death are the only suitable roles for a home in the eyes of Hardy who portrays a lack of deep connection to any place aside from “The house in which Tess had passed the years of her childhood”[[8]](#footnote-8) .

Moreover, Hardy expresses a futility to the home by depicting Tess’s acceptance of it just before her death: ‘”Ah, happy house-good-bye!”’[[9]](#footnote-9) from which it is not possible to detect sorrow from consonance and an exclamation. Hardy’s portrayal is a reflection of this common viewpoint amongst early male writers. Yet as Virginia Woolf wrote: “how small a part of a woman’s life is that… how little can a man know even of that”[[10]](#footnote-10), female writers express the bond between a woman and their home in a positive light. Jane Austen captures the home as an object of necessity within several of her novels, most obviously from the heartbreak Mrs Dashwood experiences at losing her control of the home in “Sense and Sensibility”: “so earnestly did she despise her daughter-in-law for it, that, on the arrival of the latter, she would have quitted the house for ever”[[11]](#footnote-11). The inclusion of “for ever” accompanied by the juxtaposition of such powerful hatred directed towards one’s relative, effectively portrays the powerful love and appreciation a woman feels for this inanimate object. Additionally, Hardy creates a sphere of frustration around the home through a depiction of Tess experiencing pent up anger and tension leading to behaviour that not even she herself could justify: ‘”I have done it –I don’t know how”’7 .

Independence is symbolised by the home in which women are able to explore their lives without the dominating presence of a man. A hierarchy exists within females in the household during the day, thus providing a power unattainable for women in the outside world. As in the majority of 19thcentury literature, frequent remarks are made in regard to the management of the home: ‘”Lady Catherine … did a great deal to it when Mr Collins first came”’[[12]](#footnote-12).The sole responsibility of the female demonstrates their ability to achieve without the perceived support of a husband. Linking back to the “highly developed creative faculty among women”[[13]](#footnote-13) which could be expressed domestically, the home represented a project and abundance of possibilities for the women who lived there. Moreover, the sole movements of Mrs Dalloway are recorded as she prepared for the party: “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself”[[14]](#footnote-14) within which a reflexive and semantic field of creation supports this role as an outlet of creativity. In addition, her freedom and independence is portrayed from this imagery: “a touch of the bird about her”15 contrasting with other influential characters, all of whom are constantly in conjunction with or thinking of others.

However, for many literary works the home becomes a refuge for women to hide, but also a gilded cage by which others control them. The restricted nature of the narrative in “Emma”, which focuses on marriage, conveys this somewhat oppressive nature of the home. As Emerson discussed: “one problem in the mind of the writer (is)… marriageableness”[[15]](#footnote-15) on the subject of Jane Austen’s work. Austen also transfers this view to “Pride and Prejudice” , when Jane is unable to leave Netherfield as a result of her attempts to create a permanent place for herself in their home: ‘”My kind friends will not hear of my returning home till I am better.”’[[16]](#footnote-16). The conflicting presentations of the home as a source of power and control yet also as an object of necessity and now even a means of oppression, ties into the overarching symbol of the home within literature. The home represents all that is misunderstood. Within “Pride and Prejudice” alone, there is a conflict of ideas about this notion. Austen doubts the necessity and haste in securing a home by portraying Elizabeth’s dismissal of a satisfactory proposal in a desire to achieve a more fulfilling domestic life: ‘“Accept my thanks for the compliment you are paying me. I am very sensible of the honour…it is impossible for me to do otherwise than decline them.”’[[17]](#footnote-17). This blunt dismissal of the risk of foregoing a home acknowledges Elizabeth’s bolder aspirations, in comparison to others, such as Charlotte, who approached marriage as a necessary route to domestic life: “Without thinking highly of either men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object,”[[18]](#footnote-18).

Despite an intention in the subtext to portray Elizabeth’s resistance to settling for domestic life in the absence of a greater equality, she ultimately conforms, having understood the need to silence her criticisms and accept Darcy’s proposal. The reluctance with which Elizabeth settles for marriage demonstrates the inevitable nature of the home for women. Although many resist and attempt to create power over men in different ways, it is not possible without their position in the home. A final acceptance of the home being synonymous with power is explored in “Jane Eyre”; she marries Rochester in spite of her clear reluctance to do so, having fled and only returning once her position at her new home begins to change. An inability for these characters to treat the home in their desired manner mirrors the way in which the home is a symbol of oppression caused by the restrictions female writers faced on this subject: “woman writer… also constricted and restricted by… the Houses of Fiction male writers authored.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The female role in the home away from the husband, prior to 1928, led to such separate spheres being created within the home and an isolation which carried secrets and untold stories. Evidently, male and female writers differ in their symbolism as a result of their different perspectives, yet both capture the home as an object of misconception. The ideas of women behind these doors are almost impossible for the majority of writers to decipher: “flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room.”14

A sense of secrets is at the heart of “Tess of the D’Ubervilles”, the house that Tess and Angel occupied acts as a metaphor for a vessel holding secrets: Tess “slipped the note (the confession) under his door”,[[20]](#footnote-20) which Angel never found, lost under the floorboard of the house forever. In addition, the significance of individual rooms within a house is stressed throughout various novels; in particular for Clarissa in “Mrs Dalloway” who enters “the little room”21 in order to entertain negative and selfish thoughts about her party: “Somehow it was her disaster-her disgrace… But she must go back.”[[21]](#footnote-21)The flurry of private thoughts ended briskly with a modal verb thus conveying her reluctance to return to her valued guests. A need to create isolation for oneself within a bustling home, suggests the freedom that solitude can bring to women who still forcibly seek it when others are present. Similarly, while some see the home as oppressive, for others it is a comfort and welcome shift from the outside world: “feels fold round her the familiar veils”[[22]](#footnote-22).Clarissa’s response upon returning home portrays the influence it has on her through the prominent consonance. This also harks back to its importance for marriage with that semantic field indicated from the word “veils” associated with weddings. Such an unusual plural form heightens the wide reaching effects of marriage.

It is presumptuous for us to look back at the lives of women and assume that being indoors brought suffering simply because we have never experienced such boundaries. Inevitably, women created a life for themselves and found a source for their creativity and passions within the domestic realm. While many began to desire greater freedom, this only came from the power and control they were beginning to experience from their life at home. Greater control in marriage is a significant representation of writers’ depiction of home; it is highly likely that an experience of independence at home encouraged females to seek further gratification beyond their domestic realm. The home is clearly one of the most disputed symbols in literature due to the fact that no two women or two writers experience the same concept of home. Such a simple word holds so many different interpretations and ideas, just as each room in a house holds another’s view and story.

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