

Revisiting (not Only) the Houses of English Fiction

[Review of Tereza Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited: Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017. 178 p. ISBN 978-80-246-3672-6]

Current research in Anglophone cultural and literary studies often tends to centre around various approaches to the concepts of place and space, as exemplified for instance by the thematic focus of recent international conferences held abroad as well as in the Czech Republic,¹ and Tereza Topolovská's monograph contributes to the ongoing debate. The monograph is considerably wider in scope than its title may suggest; while the text does focus on country house fiction in English literary tradition, the analysis is consistently interdisciplinary. Both the introductory chapter and the following chapter "(Country) House since 1900" deal with various theoretical approaches to the house in general, whether through architecture, philosophy, spatial poetics, history or literature. Overall, both chapters enter into conversation with a wide variety of earlier theoretical works, from selected texts by Martin Heidegger to Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958), whose focus extend beyond the English context. Also, Topolovská occasionally even challenges the views expressed in some of the theoretical sources. For instance, Raymond Williams' 1973 study of rural and urban life *The Country and the City* is referred to for the introduction of the terms Metro-land and suburb, which significantly complicate a clear distinction between the country and city. At the same time, Topolovská observes that Williams described the middle-class detective story as the only possible and plausible future for the country house novel, a view that was proved wrong by the later development of the subgenre. Regarding the subject matter in English literary tradition, Topolovská identifies Malcom Kelsall's 1993 literary theoretical study *The Great Good Place: The Country House and English Literature* as the closest predecessor to her own project.

The introductory chapter also establishes a rather inclusive definition of the country house, as Topolovská studies its historical development throughout the twentieth century: "No longer restricted to stately homes and manor houses, the country house has embraced all kinds of countryside dwellings ranging from old, converted farms and cottages to sea-side villas."² Topolovská highlights that although in the latter half of the twentieth century, the descendants of aristocracy who owned country houses often found their properties difficult to maintain, many of them decided to make the houses accessible to the public, reviving the concept of the country house as a symbol of country values of traditional England. The second chapter then emphasizes the notion of the house is particularly prominent in four realms of Anglophone literatures: "The English country house poem of the seventeenth and eighteenth century which has gone on to be

1 For example, the 32nd European Association for American Studies Conference on Environment, Place and Protest, held in London in 2018; the International Conference on The Politics of Space and the Humanities, held in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 2017; or the 21st International Colloquium of American Studies on Place and Emplacement, held in Olomouc, Czech Republic, in 2017.

2 Tereza Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited: Variations on a Theme from Forster to Hollinghurst* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2017), 10.

replaced by country house fiction of the twentieth and twenty-first century, followed by Irish Big House Fiction and the position of the house in Caribbean fiction.”³ The first two chapters thus present a thoroughly researched theoretical and historical background for the interpretative part of the study.

Dealing more closely with selected literary texts, the two following chapters employ a similarly wide frame of reference. Although page 7 lists five novels published between 1910 and 2012 – E. M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), Iris Murdoch’s *The Sea, The Sea* (1978), Sarah Waters’ *The Little Stranger* (2009), Alan Hollinghurst’s *The Stranger’s Child* (2011), and Sadie Jones’ *Uninvited Guests* (2012) – as the main focus of the study, the following analysis is not limited to these primary texts. First, besides fiction, several passages of the text briefly discuss the significance and influence of the earlier country house poems, using major examples such as Ben Jonson’s “To Penshurst” (1616), Andrew Marvell’s “Upon Appleton House” (1651), or a mocking country house poem by Alexander Pope. Second, Evelyn Waugh’s novels *A Handful of Dust* (1934) and *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) are frequently referred to throughout the monograph to provide other parallels and differences to the five selected texts, and to bridge the gap of sixty-eight years separating the publication of *Howards End* and *The Sea, The Sea*. The choice of several recent texts for analysis is fitting, as they could not have been included in Kelsall’s 1993 study.

More specifically, the third chapter focuses on the conception of dwelling in Forster’s *Howards End* and Murdoch’s *The Sea, The Sea*. To highlight the parallels between these two texts from different periods, Topolovská emphasizes that “both novels display a cyclical thematic composition which is highlighted by the employment of prevalently circular imagery and the chronological treatment of the plot as well as its positioning to the period of summer,” concluding that therefore “‘summer house fiction’ comes to existence.”⁴ Besides focusing on the two novels, Topolovská finds similarities between them and more recent literary production, for instance Don DeLillo’s 2001 novel *The Body Artist*. The chapter also mentions the problem of summer country houses being available exclusively to the middle classes, and shows the issue is still current by referring to the summer 2013 debate over the exclusivity of the English countryside in terms of population and class that took place by means of a series of wide-ranging articles on the website of the *Guardian*.

The fourth chapter titled “Strangers’ Children in the House: Post-millennial echoes of the Post-war Poetics of the Country House” contextualizes the three remaining novels mentioned earlier as the main focus of the monograph. Topolovská notes that “the absence of dominant male figures from the narratives, fathers in particular, or their marked suppression, mockery, or undermining of their traditional roles augurs the gradual corrosion of the traditionally patriarchal, male-dominated context of a country house.”⁵ Consequently, in Jones’ *The Uninvited Guests*, a little girl becomes the character who determines the plot. In addition, the early twenty-first century novels, such as *Uninvited Guests* or Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), tend to be set at Victorian replacements of earlier, historical and more authentic ancestral houses. A considerable section of the chapter deals with the decline of country houses in early twenty-first century fiction, which Topolovská

3 Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited*, 37.

4 Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited*, 62.

5 Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited*, 113.

identifies as the common theme of the three novels under analysis, besides the employment of intertextuality. In turn, Topolovská characterizes Waters' *The Little Stranger* as a "luscious hymn to decadence and Gothic novel," Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* as "a satire on the nature of Englishness, paying a stylistically brilliant homage to E.M. Forster and Evelyn Waugh," and Jones' *Uninvited Guests* as "a colourful variation on Edwardian comedy of manners mingled with a surrealist ghost story and mediation upon the nature of class and childhood."⁶ As the preceding chapter also briefly mentions *The Sea*, *The Sea* embraces features typical of the Gothic novel, all the five novels selected for analysis are variously connected by their themes and intertextual elements. In result, the monograph proves that in spite of diversity among the included texts, the country house novel remains a clearly defined subgenre responding to English literary and cultural history. For further research, the book includes a nine-page bibliography of references, conveniently divided into printed sources, lectures, and internet sources.

For all the reasons outlined above, *The Country House Revisited* is an outstanding up-to-date resource for all students and researchers interested in the intersections among English fiction, history and architecture.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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⁶ Topolovská, *The Country House Revisited*, 137.