

## The Burden of Home: Shirley Ann Grau's Fiction

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In Shirley Ann Grau's fiction, houses provide a loci for the psychological and emotional lives of families.<sup>1</sup> Her fictional houses alienate, however, when they become representative of the failure of the family to provide direction to its members. This, I believe, partly answers the critics who see in Grau's work the "absence of . . . unifying symbol, or theme, or resolving incident."<sup>2</sup> When social and emotional life turns inharmonious inside a house, the sense we get of the place changes. In "Fever Flower" from *The Black Prince and Other Stories* (1955), the house becomes "very quiet and empty" (177)—an emotionally and psychologically safe place—when the child Maureen's parents are out and she is left with the maid. With her parents' return, however, the house changes. In a flash-forward, Grau shows us the result of their handiwork, the child as "a middle-aged, strikingly handsome woman" (178), three times divorced, who now lives in an expensive apartment for one on the west coast. Raised by a mother who was "not quite human. She [the mother] did not need anyone" (172), Maureen is marked for life by the charged emotional atmosphere of her childhood home. A similar scene occurs in "Ending" from *Nine Women* (1985), Grau's newest short story collection. When Barbara Eagleton's husband leaves for good, she can actually feel the empty house settling itself for the night. "She felt a sigh of relief run along beams and floors" (122). Grau's fictive landscapes often generate from such houses and their families.

Shirley Ann Grau wrote to me in April of 1984 that she does not think "at all abstractly about [her] fiction" (Letter). In a recent *Louisiana Literature* interview, she also says, "I never think in classifications. I just don't. That's not the way my mind works" (Parrill 7). Because in Grau's fiction the houses that shelter inhabitants are so regularly a party to, and a symbol

of, the inhabitants' psychical, emotional, and physical distress, one must conclude that her patterns of imagery and symbolism, or at least her house symbols, derive from the subconscious. In five novels and many of her stories, characters fight the constricting regimen of domestic life and the houses which project it.

In *The Condor Passes* (1971), for example, young Anthony Caillet, shortly before his death, feels trapped in his mother's house. Its walls moving toward him, he fears he will be caught inside forever. When the boy's grandfather dies, Grau speaks of the old man's trapped spirit as escaping as the animal inside him might find "endless doors opening on echoing corridors, wind-swept walks, ultimate distances" (40). House walls also press in on Lucy Roundtree Evans in *Evidence of Love* (1977). To avoid complete dependence on her first husband, she runs imaginary errands and spends hours driving around when he is home. As she swings open the garage door, she feels pleased and relieved to be out. Late in life, her second husband, Stephen Henley, feels similarly claustrophobic. Finally having become as much prisoner as sheltered, he dies trying to open a door to the darkness outside his Florida retirement home. Only when his wife returns does his soul "stream . . . toward freedom" through the door she has opened (141). After his death, she herself feels as though she is "smothering" in the empty air of the place. Finally, in "Letting Go" from *Nine Women*, Mary Margaret MacIntyre flees the constricting regimen of her parents' lives and home, while in "Ending," Barbara Eagleton escapes her mother's questioning by fleeing outside only to feel "almost panicky" in the foggy night air (107).<sup>3</sup>

Shirley Ann Grau once described a house as "like a myopic vision" (*Evidence* 205). Because of its size and shape and the dimensions of those surrounding it, that house demanded from passersby a sort of near-sighted view of itself. Seen interiorly, one could think of the inhabitants as "near-sighted" in the sense that they were totally absorbed in their affairs. For characters not so enthralled by the home place, houses become symbols of isolation and alienation where domestic problems are exacerbated to the degree that characters as "inhabitants" have no alternative but to "disinhabit" their houses. Such walls project for the exile his or her loss of the emotional, even spiritual life, of the family.

I want to deal with this central motif or situation in four novels, *The Hard Blue Sky* (1958), *The House on Coliseum Street* (1961), *The Condor Passes* (1971) and *Evidence of Love* (1977), each containing a dispossessed character and a disinhabited house. Though some critics consider *The Keepers of the House* her best novel—it was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1964—I have chosen the other four because near the end of each, a character is separated from his or her house in ways more dramatic and convincing than in *The Keepers of the House*, where Margaret Carmichael's

leaving one-third of the way through lacks the intensity of Annie Landry's leaving at the end of *The Hard Blue Sky*, Joan Mitchell's at the end of *The House on Coliseum Street*, Stanley's at the end of *The Condor Passes*, or Edward Milton Henley's and his son Stephen's leaving at the end of *Evidence of Love*. All are logical outgrowths of the disharmony plaguing the lives of the people inside. Forced outside, these characters (and Margaret Carmichael from her great-grandmother's house) fail to establish a sense of identity, that narcissistic sense which often attends between a house and its inhabitants. They see and hear someone else inside the house's walls, not themselves or their reflection; yet, to remain psychologically whole, they must leave. Nothing can be gained by staying. In Grau's fiction, characters do not come home to a house as often as they flee in an attempt at psychological self-preservation.

*The Hard Blue Sky*, Grau's first novel, is set on an island off the Louisiana coast. Returning from the convent in New Orleans where she has gone after her mother's death, Annie Landry roams the island, increasingly disaffected with life there. Following her first sexual encounter, her alienation grows, especially with her father's house, whose walls seem to center and enclose all that bothers her. Trapped by the island's social and geographic boundaries and by the familial boundaries of Al Landry's house, "sometimes, when it was bright moonlight, she would wake up . . . and she would stagger up and pull open the door and send it slamming back into the wall before she could catch her breath again" (112). Other times in dry weather, she avoids the house entirely and finds private hiding places among the trees and grasses. Her first lover, Perique Lombas, does the same, though Annie's feeling of being trapped is more extreme and even increases when her widowed father marries a woman from Port Ronquille.

Annie spends the night of the wedding party roaming around outside. When she can no longer stand up, she sneaks in, thus avoiding the party in the front of the house. She liked the house empty, Grau writes, especially of the new stepmother Adele. "The whole house . . . she's got such a musky smell. You can tell it even on the front porch; you could tell it anywhere. If it wasn't raining I could stay out" (352).

The feeling of being hemmed in bothers others, too. At night, the grocer Julius Arcenaux can feel his wife's body filling the whole room, so that sometimes he ends up sleeping on the linoleum floor. Henry Livudais seeks room to breathe in the swamps and bayous where he elopes with a girl from Terre Haute, a neighboring island, in the process setting off inter-island warfare. The stepmother Adele herself has escaped Port Ronquille where her family frowned on her going with a fisherman. Finally, Inky D'Alfonso of the *Pixie*, a sailboat put in at Isle aux Chiens, suffers the heat and boredom of shipboard and island life as he awaits the sailboat owner's return.

Annie, however, is the character most circumscribed by her environment. Her father's house fails to provide her the emotional closeness she desires nor does she find it with Perique, who virtually turns his back on her. Her room "making small tight circles," she thinks, "Now . . . either I put my stuff in a suitcase or I don't. It's that simple. Now. Only when I look back on it tomorrow, I'll see that it wasn't. . . ." (360). Eventually, the house becomes increasingly remote to her. On one of her last stops, "she was a little surprised when she saw the house in front of her—the gray house where she'd been born and where, except for one year, she'd always lived. She walked all around, staring as if she'd never seen it before" (368). In the afternoon, she leaves with Inky.

Annie's abandoning the house is indicative of some larger abandonment of island custom, or perhaps of the culture as a whole. She takes not only an outsider as her lover but aids an islander from Terre Haute, whom she discovers hiding with a broken leg in a slough, thus symbolically renouncing Isle aux Chiens. Her father's house ceases to be the focus of her universe. No longer identifying with it—the house failing her in some way and she it—she heads for New Orleans, or Iberville where Inky knows someone who "always can use a man at the bar" (379). Sailing off, she foresakes her father's house but retains the memory of Perique, for "if things were ever really rough, she could tell the children about the man who nearly was their father" (381).

As Annie Landry prepares to leave her father's house on the island, Mamere Terrebone, perhaps the island's oldest resident, prepares for winter by laying in supplies and fixing her house. In contrast to Annie Landry, who flees out of self-preservation, Mamere Terrebone preserves herself another way: by building inward, fixed and rooted to one place. She relishes her house as the last defense against death, whom she has been fighting for the last ten years and who, she fears, might manage "to slip through a crack somewhere with the winter cold" (391). She buys food from the grocery and puts up the shutters. Finally, she locks the windows and places a heavy bar across the door. Like Mamere Terrebone, some of Grau's other characters are equally house-centered. In "One Summer" from *The Black Prince*, in *The Keepers of the House* (where Abigail Mason Tolliver defends the Howland estate from intruders), and in "Widow's Walk" and "Home" from *Nine Women*, the house represents a vital light to its inhabitants.

More often, however, the human spirit, weary of light in Grau's fiction, inclines toward darkness, loneliness, or worse, extinction. Annie Landry is so inclined in *The Hard Blue Sky*. By isolating herself from others and their houses, she, in turn, is isolated. So is Joan Mitchell in *The House on Coliseum Street*. Her problems, like Annie's, are psycho-sexual. Both characters are incapable of connecting with others on any physical, emotional, or psychological plane. Alwyn Berland has written that not only in Annie Lan-

dry's "initiations into sex . . . [but] in a number of other ways [she] prepare[s] us for the central character of . . . *The House on Coliseum Street*" (81-82).

Through *that* house's doors go Aurelie Caillet and her daughters, each born while Aurelie was married to a different man. Joan Mitchell, oldest daughter and the novel's protagonist, appears most harmed by a home environment where Aurelie routinely takes new husbands and where Joan's half-sister, the household's reigning beauty, competes for the younger men of New Orleans. Neither socially active like her mother, nor beautiful or athletic like Doris, Joan lives mentally and emotionally detached. She works in the campus library and takes university classes, which she often skips. When she is overcome with fear of her emotional and physical needs, fear of that ancient demiurge that provides "the oleander bushes . . . glossy thriving poisonous leaves" and makes "the grass and vines [grow] so frantically you could see them move—the way you could see the heavy white moonflowers open on summer nights" (7), she rides streetcars. During these hour-long rides, she finds the stability that is lacking at home.

Her father's and Aurelie's latest husband's conditions have paralleled Joan's own. One became estranged from the house years ago, a few months after Joan's birth, and the other gradually withdraws to the third floor of the house, happy to be left alone. Then there is the tramp who one day appears from the slums along the levee. He makes his way to the neighborhood only to fall down on the uneven sidewalks, where he remains "directly in front of the Caillet house. His outflung hand . . . a few inches away from the wrought-iron pillar that supported the iron gate." The street, says Grau, "close[s] up on itself" at sight of him, "the windows that looked out on the front porches (the windows that were nearly always kept open for a cross breeze) . . . closing"—except Joan's (24-25).

To her, the house on Coliseum Street built by her great-great-grandfather provides little emotional succor. At first, emotional, then physical walls exclude her. Metaphors of displacement and alienation may sometimes be found in a character's unmet expectations of a house's decor, for houses become "home" as a result of personal associations; houses enclose life's more personal moments as they exclude the less-valued, the disordered, the impersonal. In time a house projects the owner, who sees him or herself reflected in its decor. In this way—whether in the real house or in the house as it is imagined in fiction—one enters a kind of narcissistic relationship with his or her surroundings. Some characters, however, must seek their identity beyond what should be the repose and safety of home.

Even as a child away at summer camp, Joan Mitchell does not miss her mother's house. Later, at her aunt's on the Gulf where she goes to have an abortion, she again realizes how little Aurelie's house in New Orleans means to her. She remembers hating her mother's "bronze lamp with the fringed

shade" so much that as a child "she had carefully worked away at it until the tiny glass beads were all pulled off" (44). Home again, she goes upstairs in the house on Coliseum Street but regrets having returned and remembers, even as a child, how she wanted to go away. She is trapped, she thinks, just as she was four months earlier. Even her room's decor, the cracked dull finish of the mahogany furniture, seems alien, a reflection of her dissatisfaction with self and others. Missing is the sense of repose in a familiar, psychologically inviting place. In an effort to express herself in her surroundings, she thinks of doing over the room to suit her tastes. To do so would be to create, or to attempt to create, a new, more habitable emotional and psychological environment, one truer to her self and her experience. As is, the room does not reflect her anymore than her family does. "The good things are all down[stairs] or in Aurelie's room" (45), she thinks. In time—having made no attempt to change her domestic situation, not even her room's decor—she finds herself isolation from humans and from the walls they build around themselves and from their excluded families.

Aside from her car, she finds safety sitting at a hard steel desk on the next-to-highest floor of the library. With only the dust and carbolic odor of bindings surrounding her, she rests one-third of each day six floors above the earth. Joan chooses a place nobody else will work because it lacks air conditioning. Heretofore, the library staff tossed coins to see who would work where Joan Mitchell, the library's newest staff member, now goes willingly. Sometimes she ascends to the next level, a place without windows and whose faint yellow bulbs cast hardly any light. On the seventh floor repose uncatalogued items. High above the earth, she retreats to these windowless, cement rooms. Unlike the rooms in Aurelie's house, which Joan is dissatisfied with, the rooms on the uppermost library floor hold no associations for her and thus are suited to her psychological and emotional state. Ambivalent in her feelings toward her mother's house, she finds these rooms inviting, as they remind her of nothing in the past. Their concrete brick walls are unpainted; the rooms remain empty.

Throughout the novel, Joan senses the importance of rooms and heights. Her dislike of, or dissatisfaction with, rooms in the house on Coliseum Street is a manifestation of something deeper: perhaps fear of Aurelie's and Doris's attraction to men and her own sexuality. Heights provide distance from the fecundity of plant and human life below. On one of her nights spying on Michael, her former lover, "it seemed to her . . . that the whole dark was full of couples, the building, the bushes, the shrubs, the trees, even the leaves overhead. Soft wet sounds" (185). High up in the library, she peers through a single window on the west side and at home sees the tramp from twenty feet up. Though Shirley Ann Grau may not think abstractly about her fiction, she is undoubtedly aware here of the spatial worth of a house. In *The House on Coliseum Street*, she uses heights and the opposition be-

tween inside and outside places richly and evocatively. The dark center space of Joan's aunt's house, for example, becomes a kind of objective correlative of the psyche when Grau writes: "[going] down the long halls and the stairway" of her aunt's on the morning of the abortion, she, Joan, was "surprised to see how dark the center of the house was. She had never noticed it before" (138).<sup>5</sup>

Not long after her abortion and subsequent harassment of Michael, and having forgotten her key one night, she finds herself locked out of the house on Coliseum Street. She stands looking at the balcony across the second floor and at the glow from deep inside the narrow house. She stands where the tramp stood, or fell, on the broken sidewalks the summer before and thinks how, once the family knows she has caused Michael to lose his university teaching job, she will have to leave. Moving a chair "to the spot the sun would strike first . . . she curled up, huddled inside her . . . sweater, and waited" (242). For her, the tangible and intangible elements that make up the ethos *home* are missing. She is displaced. What she offers in emotional terms has been rejected by Aurelie, Doris, and Michael, so that finally, whether in the car, the library, or her house, Joan not only dis inhabits places but becomes a disembodied spirit herself. "She wanted to move without anyone knowing she was moving. She wanted to slip like a ghost through walls" (182).

In an interview, Shirley Ann Grau once said that she "intended to emphasize the redemption theme" in the last chapter of *The House on Coliseum Street* (Schlueter 44). Joan's being huddled in the fetal position at the sun's rising suggests the possibility of rebirth and redemption. But redemption and acceptance into the house must come, if at all, only after Joan's exile. "I'll have to go away now," she thinks. "Once they know what I've done, I couldn't stay in the house. But I can go. It's only a question of where. My father knew I would have to leave some day. And he fixed it so I can go . . . she bowed slightly to the crisp busy figure on the other side of the grave" (241).

A "house full of bitches" (171), her half-sister Doris calls it. The house on Coliseum Street—a house which Paul Schlueter says is "totally lacking in roots and family security"—has in the past provided Joan little respite from the unsettling world. Now she finds herself completely shut out. "A lock is a psychological threshold," the philosopher Bachelard has written (81). Though not intentionally set, the locked door here serves as a metaphor of dispossession. Increasingly withdrawn from the universe inside, Joan now finds herself closed out physically as well. To be excluded is to be turned loose into a world now less familiar because of lacking the referent home. Such befalls Anthony Mitchell, whom Aurelie found too quiet and dull. Another husband, Herbert Norton, gradually disappeared from their breakfast table, then from their lives. Others before Joan were

also deemed unfit to join house and family. This is a not uncommon occurrence: the character who turns away, or is turned away, from the emotional and psychological life of the family as it is represented in the house loses part of himself, loses *himself* perhaps. So estranged is Joan Mitchell from the family and the house on Coliseum Street that in the end, the world outside its walls could hardly be more foreign. Though her leaving may prove redemptive, whether it results in a return to the house on Coliseum Street is another matter.

Stanley, the black factotum in *The Condor Passes*, also preserves himself by leaving a house. Here, again, Grau relies on the motif of displacement and flight; only in *The Condor Passes*, enclosed places and spaces are presented in a somewhat different manner. It is a tribute to Ms. Grau's art that her houses and houseless wanderers never seem redundant. She accomplishes this by modifying her unifying symbol (as in *The Condor Passes*), by introducing it at a different time in the narrative (as in *The Keepers of the House*), or by varying the depth and intensity with which she examines this symbol. Sometimes, to borrow the visual imagery she often uses, she views a house "myopically"; at other times, she draws back, viewing a house and its inhabitants in broader terms. Unlike Grau's other fictions, the inhabitants of the Old Man's, Thomas Henry Oliver's, house in *The Condor Passes* are incapable of fleeing either the real, physical structure, or the genealogical "house" when things go wrong. Because Stanley is black and no family member, he survives. Trying to remain invisible, he hears or sees nothing, he says, just performs his duties.

Those remaining in the house lack the courage, strength, and perseverance to continue the Old Man's work. Where Robert Caillet, Anna, and Margaret (virtually anyone in the Old Man's family) have been corrupted, Stanley has remained intact, freer of sin and guilt; thus Grau changes her motif slightly. Stanley walks out into the rain only moments after the Old Man's death and as the drunken Robert and the daughters Margaret and Anna rush to the house—actually to the huge conservatory where the Old Man sits. "He [Stanley] took the limousine key from his pocket and dropped it on the counter. . . . He opened the door; the east wind pulled it from his fingers and slammed it inward. He did not bother closing it." After several decades of service, he leaves the family cold: their houses, cars, planes. He walks away from the house.

Behind him he could still hear the shouting, voices strung out on the wind. . . . He didn't listen. Like the Old Man, he was finished here. . . . Rain poured into his eyes, blurring his vision. . . . It would be strange not coming back, not coming this way again, a little bit like being dead. (420-21)

Not so much an emotional or psychological part of the house as the others, he calls himself the "secret thief" of the things learned in their



employment. Neither he nor his wife want any part of the real suffering of the house, however, any part of "their ghosts or their hauntings" (384). Just as have Joan Mitchell in *The House on Coliseum Street*, Margaret Carmichael in *The Keepers of the House*, or any number of Grau's characters, Stanley survives by leaving. Sometimes such figures are morally wrong to do so. The father in "The Man Outside" from *The Wind Shifting West* (1973) abandons his family, for instance. But those in *The Condor Passes* cannot escape. They are inextricably bound to the ethos of the house, to the air and spirit of Oliver history. To leave becomes impossible. Paying for their and the Old Man's indiscretions, their final punishment—like the characters in Sartre's *No Exit*—is each other and themselves. Anna and Robert live with the memory of their son Anthony's suicide-by-drowning in the Gulf, for example. Stanley says that he, Stanley, sees a grassy slope, then the beach and the water when he looks out from the porch at Porta Bella, but not so Anna and Robert. She stays on the other side of the house away from the porch and the lawn as though there's "something here she doesn't want to see." On the other hand, Robert goes to the beach when he is drunk. Stanley once sees him "shouting at the empty water" (383). The Old Man himself sits in the humid air of his tropical greenhouse, staring at the shiny leaves.

These characters' various houses represent them in different ways. The Old Man's house in New Orleans, Stanley says, is in "perfect shape, not a speck of rust, not a crack, not a dent, not a heel mark on the polished floor . . . like the house was built of stacks of dollar bills" (6-7). Reflected in its walls is an insistence upon order and detail; nothing there can be changed. Anna has her house before she even leaves the convent school. She sees it once, and the next day her father buys it. She spends the next several years remodeling and designing it. "Open the door," she thinks, "key heavy and cool in my hand. Lovely door, oval leaded glass, cut facets to catch the light. I like the door most of all about the house." She has little doubt that "people could see [her] reflection in these things" were she to die (171). And Margaret's various dwellings represent her personality.

But characters flee these houses, too—Robert flees his wife Anna's; Anthony, who drowns himself, his mother's. Only Stanley survives by not falling under the Old Man's power. Stanley holds his self in reserve. Through it all, he maintains a sense of his own worth, never losing perspective on the family. Because he has managed to stay apart from them, in the end the house holds no power. He has escaped the Old Man's claims in a way others cannot.

In *Evidence of Love* finally, characters abandon not only a physical, architectural dwelling, but sometimes the house as it is rendered metaphorically as the human body. The motif of the character removed from his or

her house appears on the first page when Edward Milton Henley's father moves to his club to avoid his wife's noisy irritability during her pregnancy. "A man maintained his own home, his own cave, in his own city," Grau writes. "Though he might never set foot inside during the long summer months, he knew his house waited for its master" (18). Though seeing to his son's financial security, the senior Henley neglects the boy's emotional and psychological well-being. Consequently, Edward Milton Henley grows up lacking a sense of rootedness to place, or to anything permanent for that matter. His life becomes a series of physical entanglements, some with men.

Whereas Edward Milton Henley follows his Dionysian energies, seeking in them some evidence of love, his son's life takes an opposite course. A Unitarian minister, the younger Henley pursues his interests in the classics, sometimes to the exclusion of all else. Having lived with his wife in the same house in Pennsylvania for over thirty-four years, he still cannot recall its color. Though he notices beauty in the world, he has little interest in anything else, even the house which has protected him from the elements these many years. When he retires to Florida, however, he begins to appreciate how a house can protect him psychologically from the encroaching dark, as Mamere Terrebone in *The Hard Blue Sky* is aware of her house. Not wanting to see his reflection outside the house at night, Stephen Henley draws the curtains to feel more secure. Eventually his surroundings control him. He complains of the Florida heat, the light, the tropical insects, all of them external enemies. "Our house was surrounded and protected by a magic white circle," he says, "a voodoo circle of malathion crystals carefully renewed each week" (107). Behind drawn curtains, with the air conditioning and electric lights on, he feels "insulated and completely apart" (109). Trapped by the house, by his many years, and by the changes he has suffered moving south, he fails in the same way his house does. Where the house is ventilated by louvers in the doors, windows, and roof—he calls his house a mechanical house and "a wind-up toy" (109)—so has his life been precisely ordered. Early on, he says, "I began carefully writing down a complete plan for my life. A timetable [which] I have managed to keep quite closely to. . . ." (93). One night as the mechanical house fails during a power blackout, so does his body. In his agony, and desperately seeking in logic some solution to his problems, some evidence of love, he even forgets his wife's name. Returning from a meeting, Lucy Roundtree Evans finds him dead inside the house. Until she opens the door, thus freeing his spirit, she can feel it trapped within "hissing and singing" (141). She herself stands fifty feet away from the house to await the police.

Lucy serves Stephen's father, the wheelchair-bound Edward Milton Henley, in a similar way. Earlier Edward Henley's fourth wife, who heretofore rarely left their house, one day simply walks out, leaving the front door open. Now it is his turn to leave. "Locked inside" a crumbling

body, he likens his ribs to the collapsing roof timbers of a deserted house—the house-body metaphor. In a final act of mercy, his daughter-in-law gives him extra Second Tablets to hasten his death. As she waits for his soul to free itself from the house of the body, she reads a magazine, ironically called *House and Garden*.

For those who find in houses evocative symbols, “house-holders,” a few other human symbols are so significant. Bachelard observes that, “Without it [a house] man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul . . . the human being’s first world. Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house” (Bachelard 7). An integrating force, a house holds the promise of physical and psychological well-being; it promises safety and respite from trouble.

Exploring the history or decor of Shirley Ann Grau’s fictional houses is less productive than exploring her use of the spatial value of a house and her examination of that missing narcissistic sense that a house reflects none other than oneself. For Grau, the house is center and substance of each fictional world. Relying upon spatial values, she succeeds in gathering characters and readers about an ancient symbol of sheltering places and spaces. Her houses can represent the final hope of those struggling against the outer dark like Mamere Terrebone in *The Hard Blue Sky* and Abigail Mason Tolliver in *The Keepers of the House*. More often they represent an often-destructive shelter from which to escape. Annie Landry in *The Hard Blue Sky*, Joan Mitchell in *The House on Coliseum Street*, the young Margaret Carmichael in *The Keeper of the House*, the child-suicide Anthony and Stanley in *The Condor Passes*, Edward Henley and his son Stephen with his Florida retirement home: all foresake the walls of a house because they are not mirrored in them. Finding not gratification but threat therein and torn by the life they find, they look elsewhere.

From *The Black Prince*, her first book, to *Nine Women*, her most recent, Shirley Ann Grau has found resonance and meaning in the image and symbol of houses and in the motif of the character displaced from them. Her comprehensive house-consciousness—her using interior places and spaces, heights, and the disordered impersonal world just beyond the threshold—all suggest a writer deeply aware of the symbolic nature of houses in her own and her characters’ lives. Her fictional houses have provided her work with a unifying symbol and incident, an organizing pattern which critics of her work have failed to notice. Her readers share the human core both of those who must build inward in order to survive and of those who must leave such inwardly leaning or inclining walls to go outward.

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## NOTES

1. Some of the ideas in this paper appear in my review of Grau's *Nine Women in Louisiana Literature*, Vol. 3, no.2.

2. More than twenty years ago, Alwyn Berland found Grau's three published books "less achieved than promising" and complained that Grau's work generally ended "with a kind of meaningless inconsequence: the sum of the parts *should* have been more substantial than the whole" (78-79). Berland, perhaps already sensing Grau's house consciousness, used metaphors of architecture to explain what she saw as Grau's aesthetic shortcomings. "[I]t is an architectural defect which Miss Grau's talent suffers from." Missing in Grau's "construction," which is often "done in beautifully polished stone . . . is the keystone . . . the firm center, the center of a vision, and hence the conviction of why her characters behave as they do" (81-84), Berland wrote.

Louise Y. Gosset also found Grau's fiction to be "largely without a dominant theme" (193). And Ann Pearson has asked, "What, if any, overall purpose does this talented writer have in her fiction" (47). Pearson continues: Grau's "only definable vision of the world lies in her perception of the ever present closeness of nature, that 'hard blue sky' which rules the lives of her characters. Thus, nature is her vision, the focal point of her best fiction" (47-48). In his comments on Grau in *Contemporary Novelists*, Chester Eisinger also sees her lacking "the complex vision that enables her both to see around and to penetrate deeply into her subject" (515). Remarkably, not one of these critics has paid attention to the house-as-focal point of Grau's fiction, especially as houses and their inhabitants' reactions to them comprise a major part of Grau's fictive universe.

3. Grau's houses signify differently depending upon the context of the fiction. In "One Summer" from *The Black Prince* a young man, attempting to accept the difficult loss of his grandfather, wanders the neighborhood at night instead of participating in the grandfather's wake. In a kind of epiphany, "Mac" Addams recalls seeing the old man two days earlier. "He'd just been sitting there, waiting. . . . And I understood then. . . . Why old people wanted to be left alone. . . . *One Day I'll be that afraid.*" By avoiding human company—because "loneliness is more bearable than company . . . it's a kind of preparation for that coming final loneliness"—Mac for the first time confronts his own mortality. "All the hot noisy outside had come down to this: our green-painted clapboard house. . . . But somehow I couldn't go inside" (252-54).

In another story, "The Way of a Man," William kills his father and has to sleep out in the fog: "[M]ost nights he would not have minded that," Grau writes. "But tonight . . . the fog would be cold and the night was going to be long" (208). In "The Man Outside" from *The Wind Shifting West* (a story originally entitled "Stranger at the Window"), a wanderer returns to find the doors of his own house barred to him. An outsider also figures in "Homecoming" when the protagonist refuses to allow a dead soldier's memory to become part of her house and in so doing makes him a sort of spiritual exile shut out from both house *and* memory.

4. Margaret Carmichael's leaving is not meant to be climatic, thus its position earlier in the novel. Because she is only partly black, she is forced out by the black family in her great-grandmother's house. Finding shelter in "a hollow tree trunk, up the slope about a mile," Margaret stays away from the house as much as she can, while keeping alive some notion of home:

She always waited until the steady dripping of the night ice ended, then she stopped feeding her fire and watched it go out. She never once stomped the coals—somewhere in the back of her memory was a warning never to kill a fire on your hearth. Way back, from a story long ago—she did not think about it, did not question or wonder, she merely obeyed. The same way she never put a hat on a bed, nor entered and left a house by anything but the same individual door. (91)

Finally leaving for good, she lives with a white man and, years later, secretly marries him, at which point she tells the great-grandmother: "I buried my blood with you. . . . I'm using only the other half now" (103). Eventually, Will Howland's granddaughter defends the house

against the night riders who have found out about his indiscretion. "The Howland they wanted was dead. His Negro wife was dead. Their children disappeared. And so they were wrecking the only thing that was left of him, of them. First the barn and then the house. . . ." (285). Abigail Mason Tolliver embraces the house, however. Her history as well as her grandfather's lives inside. When Will Howland was alive, Grau writes, "[S]ometimes he felt the age of the house, felt the people who had lived in it peer over his shoulder, wondering and watching what he was doing. . . . It seemed to him too . . . that he could hear their breathing, all of them, dozens of them, breathing together, deep and steady, the way they had when they were alive" (133-34). The Howland house is a place of collective human endeavor, a locus of the collective psyche of the family.

5. Whether in fact or fiction, attics and cellars often signify differently; so, likewise, do thresholds, center spaces of houses, and backdoors convey meaning, and gates, doors, locks, latches and still smaller interior places and spaces like drawers and chests. Grau betrays her awareness of the psychologically resonant places of a house when she mentions the "dark center" of Joan's aunt's and has Margaret Carmichael in *The Keepers of the House* cherish her makeshift hearth, the "heart" of the house in the tree trunk.

Grau appears even more interested in heights, especially as they appear in *The House on Coliseum Street* and *Nine Women*. Bachelard calls the attic a place of "detachment, privacy, and rumination" (17). Joan Mitchell feels detached in her second floor room and upstairs in the library. So, too, do the girl, "the young black female of illegitimate birth" (17) in "The Beginning" and Myra Rowland in "Widow's Walk," both from *Nine Women*. In the latter, Myra Rowland succumbs to a kind of ecstasy as, high atop the house, she "watched the constellations swing up and out of the ocean and traced the twin bands of the Milky Way." The only human sounds are "filtered by distance," Grau writes. Up on the widow's walk—and, presumably, closer to her dead husband—Myra Rowland would "fall asleep . . . waking only to the first light and bird cries, her hair drenched and dripping with dew and night fog, her lips smiling with quiet joy" (79).

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