

Houses, hovels and gypsy caravans in Powys's work

SIMPLIFYING somewhat, one could say that four types of dwelling are to be found in Powys's novels: large houses, hovels, shops and small houses. Of course houses are not inhabited only by women, nor are they built for them only. But in our culture, the house is a feminine place. The house has a strong link to woman, whether as lady of the house, or by her presence in a house of ill repute, and the main occupation of a woman, at least in Powys's time, was to 'keep house', embellish it and make the house live.

Great houses

They are bourgeois houses, manors (such as the one where the Ashovers live in *Ducdame*) and, more generally, institutions, laboratories. They are generally hostile and cold, even dangerous, when they enclose atrocities within their walls (vivisection, for instance) or when they confine mad people. Thus Lucinda Cobbold lives at the top of a "vast stone building that loomed above them [Perdita and Bum Trot] with an impressiveness that was startling without being inspiring, and portentous without being sinister."¹ It is therefore ugly and ordinary. As for Glint Hall, in *The Inmates*, one is above all aware of its barred windows, as though those who enter it have only one thought, to escape.

In this type of house, mad or allegedly mad women live or are confined: Lucinda Cobbold (really insane or only evil?); Antenna Sheer, who wanted to kill her father; Eleonora called Thither, the girl who chases reflections. In Powys's work these buildings always seem linked to a somewhat baleful world. Thus Lady Rachel Zoyland will live a normal life only after leaving Mark Court, that strange place where, according to legend, the encounter between King Mark and Merlin took place.

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, Rivers Press, 1973, p.51

Great houses become quite diabolical when they encompass scientific research (let us not forget the distrust Powys felt for this field of knowledge). The description of Dr. Brush's institution is clear enough: "those red-brick buildings contained animals in the process of being vivisected, and contained also hopelessly insane people²" and "what struck the attention of any stranger was the amount of iron work and glass work that had been used."³ Iron and glass are materials reputed for their 'coldness'. Wolf Solent notices "a ramshackle group of sheds that seemed fenced off from the road with some unnatural and sinister precaution"⁴ and we will not be surprised to learn that this is the town's slaughter house. Great houses indeed harbour evil and pain in Powys's novels. (Since the Powys family was large, John Cowper spent his childhood and boyhood in vast houses... but let whoever wishes draw his own conclusions!)



The Vicarage at Shirley, Derbyshire.
Courtesy Neil Lee

Hovels

Hovels, precarious shelters, gypsy caravans, play a double role. Unlike the great houses, these places are open to nature and the world—"The melancholy little erection, with its white-washed walls and its black-tarred roof, over-topped by tall bill-boards bearing weather-stained advertisements, was surrounded on the Lodmoor side by its own private enclosure" which "contained a small vegetable garden and a good-sized strip of grass"⁵—and are places for misfits, unwilling to accept the conventions of society, but living in close contact with nature. Gipsy May, for instance, who lives in the hovel described above "always kept her collar-bones exposed to the air, as if by that means to retain some lost link with the elements"⁶ and in a disagreement "approached the gist of the matter sideways, glancing at it, pecking at it, diving at it with a swoop before it reached the surface like a sea-gull"⁷ is quite in harmony with this dwelling. May, with her ill-defined social status, May who is wandering in search of something else, could only live in such an isolated hovel, open to the four winds. It is no coincidence that Sylvanus, the prophet whom the community hardly tolerates,

² *Weymouth Sands*, p.118

³ *Ibid.*, p.119

⁴ *Wolf Solent*, Macdonald, 1961, p.17

⁵ *Weymouth Sands*, p.133

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.376

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.374

also should live in a ramshackle house: ‘buildings’ cannot bind them; these misfits need freedom.



A gypsy caravan or “vardo”¹⁰.
Courtesy James Hayward

Powys takes up this idea again when he locates several scenes of his novels in gypsy caravans. The caravan is mobile, so that it suggests an extra dimension: there is hidden mystery. It may at first appear normal, even cosy. When Netta Page and Hastings follow old Betsy inside, “it seemed almost a natural thing that they should be drinking better tea out of better cups and saucers than any that Hastings, at any rate, was accustomed to enjoy”⁸. This impression of comfort, however, does not last, for in this spotless environment live “a pair of creatures of the masculine sex” with faces “more horrible to human sight than if they had been creatures of a monstrous nightmare.”⁹

Whatever is hidden in the recesses of a gypsy caravan may be horrible, but it may also be initiatory. When Dud No-man, attracted to Wizzie, boldly flings open the door of the caravan where he has fled, “the place was so full of steam from a great pot boiling on the stove that it took him a second to get his bearings”¹¹. This inevitably brings to

mind the Cauldron of Celtic mythology¹² and its multiple mystical meanings.

As to shelters for a few hours, these are also places where a mystery takes place, but of a more erotic nature. ‘The altar’ always offers a close contact between participants and nature. Thus the first time Gerda gives herself to Wolf is in an “empty cow-barn, its roof thatched with river-reeds and its floor thickly strewn with a clean, dry bed of last autumn’s yellow bracken”¹³, just as Persephone (a predestined name) will become Philip Crow’s lover in the recesses of Wookey Hole Caves, and William Zoyland’s in a barge used to carry hay, for Zoyland thinks that “nothing could be more congruous with the hour and the girl than to embrace his present delicious companion where the waters

⁸ *Ducdame*, Doubleday, Page & Company, 1925, p.203

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.204

¹⁰ see *Gypsy Jib – A Romany Dictionary*, ed. by J.Hayward, Holm Oak Publishing, 2003.

¹¹ *Maiden Castle*, Univ. of Wales Press, 1990, p.24

¹² Alluded to many times, as for instance Penny Pitches’ cauldron, in *A Glastonbury Romance*. [Ed.]

¹³ *Wolf Solent*, Macdonald, 1961, p.148

of the river would be flowing within an inch of their bodies.”¹⁴

Sheds, caravans, and temporary refuges shelter feminine characters who all, in one way or another, evoke another world beyond the everyday and ordinary, a hereafter, possibly a nether world which although only appearing in flashes, is nevertheless all important.

Shops

“Then at last we come to the most agitating of all topics with which this book deals: I mean its love affairs. Naturally and unavoidably, they are associated with the shops of the town” writes John Cowper Powys in his Preface to *Wolf Solent*.

Why link shops, pubs and love affairs? Because the shop is a place open to the public. One goes in and goes out freely, one meets anybody and every one. But unlike open spaces, it is characterised by its patrons or by the personality of its owner. Many scenes take place in tea-rooms or bars, such as that of *The Three Peewits*. If the inn is most often the arena where men pit themselves against others, the tea-room is much more feminine. It is not surprising: women had only recently been allowed in pubs and cafés, whereas the tea-room is associated with pastry, cosy settings, sugar, and therefore belongs to the woman’s world.

In *Wolf Solent*, the hero will be torn between two women: one of them is Gerda Torp, the stone-cutter’s daughter; the other, Christie, lives with her father, Malakite the bookseller. Gerda, whose “beauty was so startling that it seemed to destroy in a moment all ordinary human relations”¹⁵, is thus living among tombstones. Like them she is cold. She belongs as they do to the world of the margin between the living and the dead. By marrying her, Wolf in a certain way is choosing death, at least the death of that part of himself represented by Christie and by the life of the intellect.

Wolf is immediately attracted to Malakite’s bookshop, but he will be even more attracted to Christie when he meets her. In the pleasant and intimate flat above the shop “he was glad enough to yield himself up now, in this peaceful room, to what was really a vague, formless anodyne of almost Quakerish serenity.”¹⁶ This feeling of peace is also due to the presence of the young girl sitting by his side “that unloosed the flow of his speech and threw around him an unforced consciousness of being at one with himself and at one with the general stream of life.”¹⁷ Christie, a bookseller’s daughter, is herself passionately interested in reading, and it is through this common interest that she will share with Wolf a platonic love of minds.

Bookshops for Powys always partake of the sacred, for they harbour that which is forbidden. Sam Dekker guesses that Mr Evans has discovered in old Jones’ bookshop what he dreads and wishes for most in the world, that is to say “some monstrous Aphrodisiac of Obscenities or (...) some pseudo-Biblical fantasy”¹⁸ and Powys himself confides in *Autobiography* his uneasiness when he finds by chance “a private lending library of fantastical ‘erotica’” whose owner gave him the impression “of being a priest—a somewhat ambiguous young

¹⁴ *A Glastonbury Romance*, Simon & Schuster, 1932, p.890

¹⁵ *Wolf Solent*, p.58

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.71

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.72

¹⁸ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p.250

Ion—of the worship of the mother of Eros.”¹⁹ In *Wolf Solent*, the bookshop, temple of sacrosanct eroticism, shelters at the same time the ideal woman who will forever be out of reach, and the incestuous loves of the old bookseller...

Small houses

In Powys's works, these provide the warm shelter where his characters find a certain peace, a certain happiness. They are reassuring because they are small and can thus be apprehended immediately, whereas a great house makes one think that there still exist unexplored, possibly disquieting, corners.



Small houses overlooking Weymouth harbour.

In *Weymouth Sands*, Skald coming back home “stopped before one of the oldest and smallest of the time-mellowed houses, looking on the harbour”²⁰ and immediately a muslin curtain was dropped down, for Cassy Trot watches every evening for the return of her master, whom she pampers and looks after with maternal care. As for Mrs. Dearth, she stopped at a “massive and ancient door, leading into a small but solidly-built house”²¹ and the *Sea Serpent* Inn (which is more a private house than a public establishment because of its intimate and family atmosphere) “although a very small edifice (...) presented itself (...) in the form of a massive fortress, that might well have defended the Island in ancient times.”²²

These small houses, protective shells against the aggressions of the external world, are in no way autistic. Quite the contrary, since they are open to the countryside like Whitelake Cottage where tea is taken “upon a little grassy terrace overlooking the swollen stream”²³,

or like Glymes, compounded of two adjacent cottages whose front windows “shared the same extensive view, (...) one of the finest in that part of the country”²⁴, or open to the sea, like Skald's house which has “a big bow-window from which it was possible to see the entrance of the harbour”²⁵.

These reassuring shelters are dominated by a feminine presence who, giving warmth and food, can thus be compared to the image of a mother. A small house is like the wings of a hen, the pouch of a kangaroo, a mother's protection.

¹⁹ *Autobiography*, Colgate, 1967, p.256

²⁰ *Weymouth Sands*, p.71

²¹ *Maiden Castle*, p.77

²² *Weymouth Sands*, p.252

²³ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p.119

²⁴ *Maiden Castle*, p.32

²⁵ *Weymouth Sands*, p.71

It is to be noticed that Powys himself, as soon as he could, lived in small houses, whether in Phudd Bottom or in Wales. His financial means may not have left him much choice, but he admitted several times that it quite tallied with his tastes. It might also have been that thus he had every excuse not to receive any guests, who were unsufferable to Phyllis, but this explanation, even if true, is probably not the whole truth.

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This text is an extract from C. Armandet's thesis "La Philosophie de la Femme et de la Féminité", University of Poitiers, 1978. *La lettre powysienne* n°6 already published another extract, 'Some Notes on John Cowper Powys' feminine characters'.