

# Abstract

Aijmer, Celia. *Houses of Fiction: Henry James and the Art of Homelessness*. Göteborg University, Department of English, 2003.

This study investigates the troubled relationship between aestheticism, modernism and domesticity. Its title, *Houses of Fiction*, is intended to evoke association with both fictional content and literary form, as it refers to houses and homes in the fiction of Henry James as well as to his own spatial metaphor for the novel, a “house of fiction.” Detailed analyses of three novels, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881; 1908), *The Ambassadors* (1903; 1909), and *The Wings of the Dove* (1902; 1909), demonstrate how James uses houses and homes to explore shifts in the meaning of concepts such as art, dwelling, authenticity, beauty and privacy. James in each novel differentiates new values of modernity—mobility, change, cosmopolitanism—from decorative art, symbolism and the cultivation of inwardness associated with the Victorian interior. The study argues that James, by promoting a vision of ‘homelessness,’ brings together a need to reconceptualise social space and art.

Intended both as a study of genre development and of James’s fiction, *Houses of Fiction* establishes a continuity between the home as a formal model of aesthetics and as a social and historical topos. James’s claim for autonomous art is analysed in relation to domestic ideals in transformation, as the heavily decorated Victorian parlour gave way to modernist ideals of geometrical forms, volume, universalism, light and air.

Placing James’s domestic themes in a context that includes material artefacts, social practices and Victorian and modernist discourses on homes and homelessness, the study problematises the relationship between modernism’s claim to newness and the bourgeois, domestic culture that it shunned. *Houses of Fiction* points to the ambiguity of a historical moment when homelessness was first conceived as a position of resistance to social and cultural conventions, while at the same time it legitimised a turn to abstraction and universalism in art.

*Keywords:* Henry James, Domesticity, Interior decoration, Modernism, Victorian culture, Architecture, Aesthetics, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Ambassadors*, *The Wings of the Dove*.