ROUTLEDGE

British Boarding Houses in Interwar Women's Literature

Alternative domestic spaces

TERRI MULLHOLLAND

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Embraced for the dramatic opportunities afforded by a house full of strangers, the British boarding house emerged as a setting for novels published during the interwar period by a diverse range of women writers from Stella Gibbons to Virginia Woolf. To use the single room in the boarding house or bedsit, Terri Mullholland argues, is to foreground a particular experience. While the single room represents the freedoms of independent living available to women in the early twentieth century, it also marks the precariousness of unmarried women's lives. By placing their characters in this transient space, women writers could explore women's changing social roles and complex experiences – amateur prostitution, lesbian relationships, extra-marital affairs, and abortion – outside traditional domestic narrative concerns. Mullholland presents new readings of works by canonical and non-canonical writers, including Stella Gibbons, Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys, and Virginia Woolf. A hybrid of the modernist and realist domestic fiction written and read by women, the literature of the single room merges modernism's interest in interior psychological states with the realism of precisely documented exterior spaces, offering a new mode of engagement with the two forms of interiority.

Terri Mullholland holds a doctorate in English from the University of Oxford. Her teaching and research interests are in early twentieth-century women's writing and the intersections of literature and spatial theory. She has published on Jean Rhys, Dorothy Richardson, and May Sinclair, and is co-editor of *Spatial Perspectives: Essays on Literature and Architecture* (2015).

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father, Michael Mullholland, and to my mother, Pauline Mullholland.

It is also for Neil Hornsey, with my love, always.

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Abbreviations

ADO	Storm Jameson, 'A Day Off' in Storm Jameson, *Women Against Men* (London: Virago Modern Classics, 1982).
AHTS	Jane Hukk, *Abdullah and His Two Strings* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1927).
ALMM	Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930; repr. London: Penguin, 2000).
B	Stella Gibbons, *Bassett* (London: Longmans, 1935).
IN	Ellen Burgess, 'Indecision', *English Review* 51 (September 1930): pp. 387–92.
NH	Lettice Cooper, *The New House* (1936; repr. London: Persephone Books, 2004).
VD	Jean Rhys, *Voyage in the Dark* (1934; repr. London: Penguin, 2000).
WITS	Rosamond Lehmann, *The Weather in the Streets* (1936; repr. London: Virago, 1981).
Y	Virginia Woolf, *The Years* (1937; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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Introduction

Reading the single room in the British boarding house

> The room was typical of cheap furnished lodgings. A dusty aspidistra, showily ornamental furniture, a gaudy wallpaper faded in patches. There were signs that the personality of the tenants had struggled with that of the landlady; one or two pieces of good china, much cracked and mended, so their saleable value was *nil*, a piece of embroidery over the back of a sofa.
>
> Agatha Christie, 'The Listerdale Mystery' (1925)[1]

Take a quick glance through the fiction published in the interwar period and you will find many descriptions of rooms in temporary lodgings that mirror the one above, taken from Agatha Christie's short story 'The Listerdale Mystery' first published in *Grand Magazine* in December 1925. From popular romance and detective novels to those works now considered classics of modernist literature, it seems there is universal agreement about what a bed-sitting room, or single room in a boarding or lodging house looks like. The cheapness, the shabbiness, the poor taste of the landlady's furnishings, and the aspidistra reference immortalised by George Orwell in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) are recurring motifs. Indeed, these settings seem so standardised and unremarkable that they pass unnoticed, relegated to mere backdrop: but what if there were more to these rooms than initially meets the eye? Victoria Rosner has recently argued that 'an anonymous room may wield more influence than appearances suggest', and it is the stories behind these rooms that this book explores.[2]

In the interwar period many writers embraced the dramatic opportunities afforded by the transient lives of a boarding or lodging house full of strangers, yet amid the intrigue of the faint voices through the walls and the drama of lovers smuggled in under the cover of darkness, is the overlooked reality of the middle-aged spinster or young office worker struggling to live on barely a pound a week in her shabby single room. This book argues that a distinct literary sub-genre emerged in Britain between the wars, in which women writers used the space of the boarding house to articulate women's changing social roles.

Women have long been allied with the domestic ideal of the family home. In 1865 John Ruskin famously described 'the true nature of home' as 'the place of Peace [...] a sacred place, a vestal temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods'. This idealisation of home would not be possible without the ubiquitous 'enduringly, incorruptibly good' wife who is wise 'not for self-development, but for self-renunciation' and 'modesty of service'.[3] The single room in a boarding or lodging house provided an alternative to the traditional location of domestic space. While the family home is associated with morality, respectability, and control, the boarding house room becomes the opposite of these, a site of anti-domestic values. This stems from nineteenth-century associations with lodging houses as 'hotbeds of crime and moral depravity'.[4] Sharon Marcus has described how in the nineteenth century: 'Its epitomization of urban ills made the lodging house thoroughly antidomestic, both because it typified the city (which [...] was opposed to the home) and because the imagery of dirt and contagion contradicted the domestic ideal's emphasis on cleanliness and order'.[5] Two objections that dominated debates in the press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century about the dangers of boarding and lodging houses, particularly as spaces for women, were 'that they encouraged transience and discouraged domesticity'.[6] Central to these debates was the tension between these alternative domestic spaces and the private family home. Many boarding house keepers would go to considerable efforts to uphold strict moral codes and domestic values, ironically mimicking the very family homes to which they were perceived as the antithesis.

The narrative of the boarding house room

The literature of the boarding house is an integral part of the many discourses affecting women in the early twentieth century: the conflict between marriage and spinsterhood, issues of home, privacy and domesticity, as well as wider concerns of class, sexuality and nation. Taking up Gaston Bachelard's suggestion in *The Poetics of Space* (1958) that we 'read a room', this book reflects on the stories that these literary interiors tell, not only of individual characters, but of a particular way of life for the unmarried woman between the wars.[7] In this study new readings are provided of both canonical and non-canonical writers including Lettice Cooper, Stella Gibbons, Winifred Holtby, Storm Jameson, Rosamond Lehmann, Dorothy Richardson, Jean Rhys and Virginia Woolf. Diana Fuss argues that 'the architectural dwelling is not merely something we inhabit, but something that inhabits us'.[8] Like Fuss, I view these interiors as physical as well as psychological and my intention is to understand both the material and affective dimensions of the boarding house as an alternative domestic space for women.

In Christie's 'The Listerdale Mystery' the room in question is inhabited by Mrs St Vincent, a widow of reduced circumstances, an impoverished

genteel, forced into a boarding house after the death of her husband. Women living in boarding houses are diverse characters. They are not only widows and elderly spinsters, they are also younger working women, such as T. S. Eliot's 'typist home at teatime' in *The Waste Land*, who must make her room serve as both bedroom and living space, with her 'food in tins' alongside her 'drying combinations'.[9] They may inhabit similar rooms, but their experiences are very different. There is Miriam Henderson, a young dental secretary, in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (1915–67) series, embracing her independent life and her own 'triumphant faithful latchkey',[10] and Mary Datchet in Virginia Woolf's novel *Night and Day* (1919), an active member of the women's suffrage movement who is portrayed working with purpose in her single room. They provide a sharp contrast to the middle-aged and unnamed protagonist of Storm Jameson's novella *A Day Off* (1933), who lives a precarious life of uncertainty, waiting for money from her lover to pay the rent on her bed-sitting room. Boarding house rooms and the men who pay for them are also features of Jean Rhys's interwar novels, where her female protagonists not only occupy spaces outside the family home, they also enact roles outside the domestic ideal, merging the boundaries between the wife in the house and the prostitute on the street. There are also the women who run boarding and lodging houses, as depicted in Stella Gibbons's novel *Bassett* (1934), who experience the conflicts between the home as both commercial and family space. A common theme throughout all these novels is poverty; even those in paid employment struggle to make ends meet on their meagre salaries. Their single rooms can be both liberating and imprisoning, and sometimes both simultaneously, and these narratives reflect the wider spatial, economic, and sexual constraints placed on women living alone in the city.

This was a phenomenon that was particularly noticeable in interwar Britain. Although women had been living alone in the nineteenth century and continue to do so in the present day, the interwar period saw significant growth both in the numbers of unmarried women living outside the family home and in the representation of this experience in literature, making it not only a historical phenomenon, but also an aesthetic one with wider social and political implications. What these boarding house narratives draw out is the complexity of domestic ideology in relation to women's lives in the period. Life for women in Britain between the two World Wars has been retrospectively defined by its contradictions: increasing independence and greater opportunities outside the home, contrasted with a dominant ideology which maintained that a woman's place was firmly within the familial structure. Census data for England and Wales shows the number of single women over the age of twenty-five increased from around two million in 1911 to over two and a half million by 1931, far outnumbering single men whose numbers had not even reached two million by 1931. There was a high chance that those women who had not found a husband by their late twenties would never marry. In 1921 fifty per cent of women

who were single in their late twenties remained so a decade later (compared to only thirty per cent of men who failed to marry).[11] But despite such considerable growth in the numbers of unmarried women, marriage was still seen as a woman's ultimate destiny.

The single room in the boarding house or bedsit represents both the freedoms of independent living available to women in the early twentieth century and simultaneously marks the precariousness of unmarried women's lives. By dwelling in alternative forms of accommodation, women were both living outside traditional domestic structures and their associated stability, and placing themselves outside socially and culturally defined domestic roles.

This study focuses only on the experience of women. Whereas living alone outside the family home had long been deemed acceptable and even desirable for the male bachelor, the increasing numbers of unmarried women taking up residence in single rooms were not met with the same societal approval. As Alice T. Friedman has outlined, unmarried men were never considered as 'outcasts from the social order' in the same way as women.[12] Historically, the boarding house or bedsit was a very different place for the bachelor man – it allowed him greater freedom than the family home, while still providing him with all the advantages of meals and domestic services. Writing about modernity and the 'spaces of femininity' in Impressionist art, Griselda Pollock argues that there was 'a difference socially, economically, subjectively between being a woman and being a man' in the modern city and that this translated into art that privileged the man as the viewer and the subject, and the woman as the viewed object.[13] The male perspective subordinated the domestic space of the home to the public spaces of city life, such as bars and brothels. Depictions in the literature of the boarding house follow a similar pattern. The boarding house worlds portrayed by male novelists from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s, including Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, and later, George Orwell, Patrick Hamilton, Julian Maclaren-Ross, and Norman Collins, utilise their male characters' greater access to public spaces and freedom to move unimpeded through the city within the plot.[14] With the exception of Hamilton, who was to attempt a female point of view in the character of Miss Roach in *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947), presentations of the subjectivity of the single woman are limited. When the artist is a woman, Pollock argues that there is an important shift in positionality and visibility:

> The spaces of femininity operated not only at the level of what is represented, the drawing-room or sewing-room. The spaces of femininity are those from which femininity is lived as a positionality in discourse and social practice. They are the product of a lived sense of social locatedness, mobility and visibility, in the social relations of seeing and being seen.[15]

The writers discussed in this study engage with the 'relations of seeing and being seen' by utilising the space of the boarding house room in order to explore interiority through interior space. In her study of unmarried women, Katherine Holden has drawn attention to the 'invisible majority' of women after the war who were not living within families, 'who lived in lodgings, boarding houses or institutions or who had no permanent home'.[16] Women writers who utilise the space of the boarding house not only provide the reader with a new perspective, they make visible the women who occupy these spaces alongside the social systems and discourses that underlie their positions.

The proliferation of single rooms in boarding and lodging houses and bedsits as a narrative setting has passed largely unanalysed by literary scholars. In twenty-first-century literary studies there has been a recent critical shift from thinking about women and their relationship with the city streets and the potential for a female *flâneur* to thinking about the domestic space of the home.[17] In particular, Christopher Reed and Victoria Rosner have drawn attention to the links between modernism and domesticity, and the 'dismantling of Victorian domesticity' associated with the traditional home.[18] Reed has pointed out how in modernism the domestic is 'perpetually invoked in order to be denied', making it 'a crucial site of anxiety and subversion' and Rosner has argued that the home is not utilised as 'a backdrop or symbol' for modernist writers, but 'a kind of workshop' for exploring 'interior design and social change' in order 'to find new artistic forms for representing intimacy and daily life'.[19] Despite acknowledging the shift in the modern period to new ways of living, the focus has remained on the middle-class home, and the same critical attention has not been given to women living in the alternative domestic spaces of the boarding or lodging house. There exist at present only two discussions of boarding and lodging houses in literature, one on the author E. H. Young by Chiara Briganti and Kathy Mezei, and the second on Una L. Siberrad and Dornford Yates by Kate Macdonald.[20] The social historian Leonore Davidoff published an essay 'The Separation of Home and Work? Landladies and Lodgers in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century England' in 1979, in which she stated that:

> Historians, as well as other social commentators, have tended to regard lodging as an insignificant phenomenon in recent history. When they have noticed it at all, it has been treated primarily as a housing category.[21]

Davidoff's essay remains the only historical work to date on women in boarding houses in Britain.[22] This book seeks to address this gap by using a combination of historical material, literary analysis, and spatial theory to encourage a fresh appreciation of what this pivotal, but frequently overlooked, aspect of interwar literature can tell us about women's relationship with space and society.

Boarding houses, lodging houses, and bedsits

In defining the boarding house this study takes a broad approach, including rooms in boarding and lodging houses, as well as bedsits and the more informal arrangement of renting a room in another family's house. Those inhabiting the latter category are often euphemistically referred to as 'paying guests' rather than 'boarders' or 'lodgers' to avoid the contamination of the family home with the public world of commerce.

The definition is necessarily broad due to the fluid nature of the categories involved. The meaning of the term 'boarder' can be traced to Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of 1755, where 'board' originally meant 'table'; thus, a boarder was one who lives in the house of another and shares their table, whereas a lodger has a room without the provision of food. Lodgings for Johnson are also a form of 'temporary habitation'.[23] Interwar guides to hotel and boarding house management generally differentiate boarders from guests at a hotel on the length of stay; guests stay 'for some uncertain period from day to day', while in the average boarding house the residents were 'in the main of a permanent type'.[24] In reality, these definitions were fairly flexible; both boarders and lodgers inhabited a range of accommodation from formally named boarding houses to single rooms in private houses for both long and short term periods of time. Establishments in the cities catered for more long-term residents than those in the seaside towns who would have seasonal fluctuations in their clientele. Francesca Berry defines a bedsit as 'a single-occupancy, single-room tenanted dwelling, likely to be one of several in a multi-occupancy house and where certain daily practices such as washing and dining ordinarily take place in communal rooms'.[25] Thus rooms within both boarding and lodging houses can often be broadly defined as bed-sitting rooms.

The British boarding house has much in common with the Parisian apartment. In her discussion of apartment living in Paris and London, Sharon Marcus discusses how the associations that come to mind when evoking the nineteenth-century English home is 'a self-contained world', a preserved 'domestic oasis' distinct from the outside world. In contrast the apartments favoured by Parisians were 'miniature cities', 'not enclosed cells, sealed off from urban streets, markets, and labor but fluid spaces perceived to be happily or dangerously communicating with more overtly public terrain'.[26] This merging of public and private space is what makes the boarding or lodging house distinct from the traditional self-contained model of the family home. What makes the boarding house distinct from living in a flat is the amount of private space available. Boarding house and bedsit living was usually confined to a single room, with a shared bathroom and often the option of communal meals in a shared dining room or cooking on a single gas ring. Boarders and lodgers were also more likely to reside in someone else's house with the landlord or landlady on site.

The growth of boarding and lodging at the end of the nineteenth century followed the shift to an increasingly urban and mobile population. Actual

numbers of lodgers and boarders have always been difficult to calculate due to the problems of defining them in the Census; often they did not appear on the electoral register, as many were not eligible to vote.[27] In 1868 there were only fourteen thousand lodgers on the electoral register, but the total number of lodgers in metropolitan boroughs was estimated at between two and three hundred thousand.[28] In a paper 'On Middle-Class Houses' given to the Royal Institute of British Architects in November 1877, William H. White suggested that architects should build apartments along Parisian lines in London since within central London 'the great mass of the residents are lodgers. The neighbourhood of the Strand is almost entirely rented by tenants and sub-tenants, who occupy a storey, a set of rooms, or a single room'.[29]

At the bottom of the scale were common lodging houses, an institution in nineteenth-century English towns and cities. They catered for the very poor and the itinerant population and were, for many, the last resort before the casual ward of the workhouse. Associated with dirt, disease, and immorality, the reputation of the common lodging house was not a positive one: Friedrich Engels described them as 'hot-beds of unnatural vice'.[30] The Common Lodging Houses Act, 1851 forced authorities to register and regulate the lodging houses in their jurisdiction and required that the sleeping accommodation of men and women be segregated. In his social history of housing, John Burnett has pointed to the difficulty in administrating the Lodging Houses Act due to the range of lodging accommodation available at the time 'which ranged from filthy, overcrowded thieves' dens and "twopenny brothels" at the bottom to reasonably comfortable boarding-houses for artisans, commercial travellers, clerks and students at the top'.[31]

The philanthropist and social researcher Charles Booth cited an 1889 report by the Chief Commissioner of Police that recorded exactly one thousand common lodging houses registered in London, with a capacity of 31,651 lodgers. Booth declared that the female-only common lodging houses 'would appear to be almost entirely occupied by women of the lowest class – thieves, prostitutes, and beggars, with a very small proportion of casual earners such as crossing-sweepers, basket-hawkers, charwomen, and, in the Notting Hill district, washerwomen'.[32]

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as towns and cities continued to expand without additional housing provision 'whole streets and districts of once genteel family homes became "rooming house" and common lodging house areas'.[33] The 1931 Census recorded a fifteen per cent increase over the previous ten years of those living in hotels, boarding and lodging houses in London and Greater London to 356,853.[34] It is difficult to estimate the actual number of lodgers as many boarding and lodging house proprietors did not run professional establishments; subletting was common and spare rooms in the family home were frequently let to single lodgers, particularly in London where two-fifths of all families

shared a house.[35] Leonore Davidoff has outlined how perceptions of boarding and lodging changed significantly in the nineteenth century when privacy was increasingly valued and the sharing of a house with lodgers implied the family could not afford to keep themselves private.[36]

There were also concerns about respectability. Particularly if the boarders were female and the landlady had no male relative in the house, she ran the risk of her respectable attempt at financial independence being labelled a brothel. This association is frequently alluded to in popular fictional accounts. In Annie Bradshaw's *Murder At The Boarding House: A Detective Story Founded Upon Fact* (1936), the landlady of the Bloomsbury boarding house where the murder has taken place defends the respectability of her house to the police: ''Tisn't a bawdy house, where casuals can come and go as they please. Why, I'm as particular as if it might be the Carlton, or the Ritz, and well my lodgers know it too. Never let a room for shorter than a month'.[37] The landlady's emphasis on the long-term nature of her residents also elevates the status of her establishment above the casual accommodation available in the common lodging house.

Respectability was mapped onto the geographical location of the boarding house. In a recent article on the literary places of Bloomsbury, Sara Blair has noted that: 'For single women in particular, the vestigial aura of respectability made it socially possible to dine and board independently in the mushrooming Bloomsbury lodgings catering to their needs'.[38] However, while the squares and central streets of Bloomsbury maintained a 'precarious gentility', the minor streets and borders of the area were 'almost wholly given up to a poor class of lodging-house keepers'. More affluent areas for hotels and 'the better class of lodging house' included Mayfair and St James, which by the 1890s were no longer solely occupied by wealthy families in individual houses.[39]

Housing the single woman

In the late nineteenth century there were around two or three male lodgers for every female lodger, but by the early twentieth century numbers of women lodgers were growing.[40] The early twentieth century was a period of rapid social and cultural change. Technological innovations such as the typewriter, the telephone and a burgeoning services sector contributed to a changing labour market and resulted in an influx of single women to the cities, particularly London, to take up employment opportunities in these new fields of work as secretaries, clerical workers, and sales assistants. Between 1861 and 1911 female clerical workers in London increased from 279 to 569,850.[41] There were around five million women workers at the beginning of the twentieth century making up twenty-nine per cent of the total workforce.[42]

The increase in women workers resulted in a pressing need for affordable housing that simply was not available. The late 1880s and 1890s saw the

building of residences in London offering bed-sitting room accommodation in shared blocks. However, as a writer in *The Englishwoman's Review* noted in 1900, 'the number of professional women in London, and especially in central London, increased very rapidly, [and] the supply of suitable house-room naturally did not increase at anything like the same rate'.[43] Accommodation for the professional woman included the Ladies' Residential Chambers on Chenies Street (built in 1888) and York Street (built in 1892) and Sloane Gardens House (built in 1889), which was run by the Ladies' Associated Dwellings Company. However, these were permanently crowded and had a long waiting list. They were also relatively expensive: the Chambers ranged in price from thirty to ninety pounds per year making it too expensive for the majority of working women. Sloane Gardens House was more affordable at ten shillings per week for an unfurnished room, compared to between eighteen and twenty-five shillings per week in a private ladies' boarding house. In an article in *The Contemporary Review* in 1900, Alice Zimmern suggested that a woman would need to earn at least one pound per week to afford around fifteen shillings on board and lodging and suggests that: 'The lady who earns less presents a problem for the wages rather than the housing question', pointing to the significant difference that existed between the wages of men and women.[44]

It may have been a wages question, but there remained significant numbers of women earning one pound per week or less. Stephen Constantine puts the male worker's average weekly wage at around three pounds per week in the interwar period, with women 'at best earning around two-thirds' of this.[45] For women on lower incomes small boarding houses run by philanthropic organisations provided rooms at cheaper rates, although as Martha Vicinus has pointed out these catered mainly for young women under the age of thirty, thus 'encouraging women to think of work as a temporary state before marriage'.[46] It also suggested that the housing was filling a short-term need, and this was echoed by religious organisations that provided accommodation for women on a daily or weekly basis only in order to ensure that it was not used permanently. Hostels run by religious organisations included the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) founded in 1855 and The Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) founded in 1875. The objective of the GFS was to unite 'girls and women of the empire to uphold purity of thought, word and deed'. They had GFS hostels, referred to as lodges, in most of the large towns of England and their literature stated that 'Girls engaged in professions, industry, and business of all kinds are welcomed as boarders', but most lodges stipulated that the maximum stay was one month and they did not accept permanent residents.[47]

The Homes for Working Girls in London (HWGL), founded in 1878, provided longer-term accommodation and by 1905 had eight homes with provision for around 550 girls in hostels across London.[48] Like the YWCA and GFS it also enforced Christian practices on its inhabitants. Indeed,