



**"The Queen Anne Tradition of Hierarchy: Spatial Separation of the Genders, Races, and Classes in Victorian Homes"**

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remarks on the nomination of this paper  
submitted by Barbara Kernan  
Women's Studies

This assignment was the culminating project for the Women's Studies 434 course called "Design and Domesticity." Students were provided with an actual house design from an American plan book from the late 1800's. An exterior view and a floor plan with some description provided the basis for student research and synthesis of course discussion and readings. In addition to the house itself, a photograph of an actual room from the period featuring period decor was provided. While this room was not actually in this particular home, it could have been, and offered a way for students to analyze gendered space via decorating detail. Each student's house and room were different from the others distributed. Some homes reflected the occupants' wealth while others reflected a more modest middle class income.

Katie's paper was particularly successful because of its scholarly tone and ample research. I am pleased that Katie utilized not only current scholarship on gendered space but that she also incorporated the writings of such important period critics as Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Henry Hudson Holly in her analysis. I like very much the emphasis which she chose to place on the influence of Darwin on Victorian domesticity and domestic architecture. In the course I tried for a balance of such old and new criticism. Katie also cites the information she learned on the three house tours we enjoyed in the city of Eau Claire. In this regard, Katie's paper reads like an analysis by an art historian in its meticulous attention to architectural detail. First, she lays out the physical description of her evidence; then she interprets it using the theory she has studied. Indeed, she mentions Kenneth Ames work as a model. I am pleased to see the methodology of material culture studies practiced so well here. Her analysis is thorough, thoughtful, and speculative in the way it considers the influence of past domestic practices on 19th century and modern women. Her desire to include women of ethnicities other than those privileged at the time, as well as domestic servants speaks to her concerns regarding oppression. This paper shows us how studying the past can broaden our understanding of women today.

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Recently, gender roles and expectations for women have become less definite and perhaps more confusing than in years past. With a lesser emphasis on domesticity and an increased focus on work in the public labor force, women seem to have some ambivalence about what they are “supposed” to do and what they want to do. Many women seem to exhibit an inclination to embrace domesticity, while others feel it an obligation. A feminist-historical analysis of Victorian women’s lives—including their roles, their families, and, more tangibly and tellingly, the homes in which they dwelled—may help to determine the domestic roots from which much modern gendered ideology, including modern women’s ambivalence regarding domesticity, stems. In order to empirically illustrate the relationship between women and domesticity, I will take a look back in time to the Victorian era. I will examine a nineteenth century Queen Anne-style home, its floor plan, its outside features, and its ornamentation in order to draw inferences that might describe what the architecture and spatial design indicate about how Americans viewed and valued women, gendered relationships, and domesticity in the Victorian era.

The house I will be examining in the following analysis is a relatively large Queen Anne home of the Victorian time period in the United States. The house indicates various possibilities about the family that lived there, the functions of the spaces, some of the social influences of the time period and, more specifically, probable effects of the time period on the women who dwelled in the structure. The outside aspects of the house—the siding, roofing materials, overhangs, and porch—indicate various ties between the family and their natural surroundings; the indoor features

of the house—the situation of the rooms, furniture, windows, closets, and stairwells—illustrate the significance of public, private, and gendered spaces.

To begin, I will give a synopsis of the outdoor features of the house. As aforementioned, the home is categorized as a Queen Anne. This housing genre was developed in the Victorian era mainly as a way to demonstrate a family's attention to intricate detail, as well as to stress the importance of using a wide range of nature-influenced building materials in order to enhance a family's relationship with the natural environment. Queen Anne houses are typically tall, asymmetrical, grandiose homes with expansive varieties not only of structural materials, but also of very artful, elaborate decorative details (Wright).

The house of my attention is no exception to this uniquely Queen Anne rich, decorative tradition. There are many varieties of siding materials according to my house's floor plan; the outer housing materials consist of: ½ inch lap siding (overlapping shingle-type material), redwood shingles, slate roofing, stone, and ashlar (crude stone blocks, stacked together to form the foundation and used for ornamentation in the wood near some of the windows). Erratic moldings border the doorways, windows, roof, awnings, and encompass the front porch entryway area. Several sturdy, intricately carved pillars stand beneath the overhanging roof of the front porch. There is a steeple-like tower structure built into the front of the house, extending from the left side of the front porch; this tower neighbors a tall, narrow brick chimney. There are several places on the outside of the house, including on the front face of the steeple tower and above one of the rear windows, where stone has apparently been incorporated, built into the wood in order to make linear, geographic patterns within the wood.

This Queen Anne has a substantial front porch that leads directly from the large lawn area into the doorway of the front reception room (front parlor). This porch serves as a passageway to symbolize the direct connection between the house, its family, and its guests with nature (Wright). Above the porch is an extension of the roof—a large awning/overhang structure—that shares the

same shingling materials as the roof. Carved into the overhang is an ornate sunburst. Although the rough sketch of the house to which I am referring does not give justice to the sunburst, I can only assume, if this home follows the tradition of most Queen Anne houses, that it is a very beautiful, elaborate design that, once again, hints at the home's connection with its natural environment (Wright).

According to Clifford Edward Clark, Jr. in his book, *The American Family Home (1800-1960)*, speaking of Henry Hudson Holly's preferences for designing Queen Anne houses, "Holly stresses the importance of using contrasting natural colors on the exterior to bring out textures and irregularities of the building's surface" (76). The house of my attention is sketched only in black and white, so I am not certain what colors the house may have been; according to researchers' descriptions of Queen Annes, as well as my own experience on some local Eau Claire tours of Queen Anne homes, I can almost be sure that there were a variety of probably five to seven different nature-inspired colors painted on the outside of the house to accent what Holly calls the "irregularities" of the house. These irregularities, in Holly's estimation, should emphasize the light/dark contrast of the natural sunlight by means of employing many overhangs in order to heighten shadowing effects (76). The house I am analyzing certainly achieves the "irregular" goals Holly emphasizes. Apart from the main overhang covering the porch, the house has four other visible places in which the roof is purposely oversized in comparison to the structure it covers, thus leaving many awnings and overhangs to intentionally produce bold shadowed effects.

The doorways of the house hold additional information. The front door, situated at the rear of the porch, appears to be a double-door. Not only is this double-doorway feature a matter of convenience and functionality for the family, it may have indicated some issues regarding gender. According to Daphne Spain in her book, *Gendered Space*, large, wide doorways were necessary in order to accommodate the large girth of Victorian women's hoop skirts. Interestingly, there is a smaller, narrower doorway on the side of the house that stands flush with the lawn. Perhaps, as

Spain might infer, this could have been an entrance to a “men-only” space, like a library or a billiard room. Although this house’s floor plan does not have either of these rooms specifically listed, having a small doorway on the side of the house certainly was not intended for women. The differences in doorways hint that even the outside of a Queen Anne indicates limitations for women in terms of gendered space.

Before beginning the indoor tour, I think it is necessary to critically examine the social institutions and ideals that were pervasive during the Victorian age, because many of the social and gender-related convictions of the time period were reflected in homes, particularly in the indoor floor plans and the decoration of rooms. The social ideology of the nineteenth century had a lot to do with the previously mentioned emphases on structural irregularities, connections with nature, and color schemes. Henry Ward Beecher asserts, “a house is the shape which a man’s (sic.) thought takes when he imagines how he (sic.) should like to live. Its interior is the measure of his (sic.) social and domestic nature. It interprets, in material form, his (sic.) ideas of home, of friendship, and of comfort,” so, the home is obviously a place through which the Victorian people sought to individually express themselves (Clark 104).

Not only were the outdoor and indoor spaces of the home supposed to be representative of the family’s convictions and affinities, the home illuminated the popular ideas of Darwinism—the ideology that humans are advanced, more evolved, and superior beings than others in the natural world—that prevailed during the nineteenth century. The trend during the era of the Queen Anne house, according to Glenna Matthews in her text, *Just A Housewife*, was for people to be as attached to nature as possible, while still upholding a level of civilized humanness that could ensure human dominion over nature (119). Clark elaborates on this ideology: “Since the Victorians saw the natural world as emblematic of divine truths, to pattern family relationships after nature was, from their perspective, to reinforce society’s most basic institution with the underlying laws of the universe” (104). Darwinism, then, became the doctrine by which most middle-class white families

dictated their house plans and executed their daily practices. Because Darwinism emphasized nature to such a large degree, and because nature was so closely associated with biology, the ideas of nature began also to delineate various “spheres” of separation for the sexes within their homes (Matthews 121).

The Darwin ideas about biology reinforced social ideals about women’s “place.” The biologist/essentialist argument that men and women are different, and that they should live their lives according to these differences, began to prevail:

The notion of separate spheres of appropriate activity for men and women was strengthened by the acceptance of Darwinian ideas in the 1870’s...The idea that women had particular talents intrinsic to their biological makeup was widely accepted as a truism. In addition to being emotional and religious by nature, women were seen as having an aptitude for art and beauty. Women were still expected, as Harriet Beecher Stowe had stressed, to serve the family and to be self-sacrificing, but increasingly they were also expected to exercise their creative and artistic talents. Middle-class women were taught from an early age to draw and play the piano, crochet, and design elaborate ‘female elegancies’ that could be displayed around the house (Clark 106).

Darwinism and essentialism further encouraged different levels of biologically-induced ideologies by introducing the idea of gendered space. Different rooms and features of homes became seen as inherently female, while others became distinctly male. For example, in most Queen Annes and Victorian house situations, females reigned over the parlors, sitting rooms attached to their bedrooms, and upstairs levels (second floors), while men dominated rooms like the billiard room and library—as discussed before—and any space that insinuated public experience or commerce. Of further significance to the setup of Victorian homes, especially middle- to upper-class inhabited Queen Anne houses, was the advent of some level of industrialization. According to Daphne Spain,

“Prosperity and industrialization had begun [in the mid-nineteenth century] to create a middle class that could afford larger homes than the two-room frame structures occupied by colonial and eighteenth-century American households. At the same time, since the household was no longer the major economic unit of production, Americans felt that family life was threatened by the transfer of its traditional functions outside the home” (122). So, in order to preserve the women’s separation from the “threatening” aspects of commerce, certain rooms had to be designated as women’s space, while others had to be business- and outsider-friendly so that men could continue their traditions of masculine industriousness in terms of business and making money.

Although this gendered structure may have had its benefits—women were able to socialize with each other separate from the men; women could work on arts and crafts independently or with female friends; and housewives were valued at a much higher level than they have been late in this century, because domesticity was a crucial and artistically valuable feature for everybody’s daily lives, men and women alike—the gendered spaces also brought forth limitations, especially for the women. First, Darwin’s own perceptions of marriage postulated that women were seen as modes of entertaining men with “chit-chat” and “play” (Matthews 119). Also, women were to be participatory in only domestic affairs; they were disallowed from participating in anything public, which meant that they had to rely on men for finances. Even poorer wives who had to work in order to help support the family were unable to have sovereignty over their earnings, because their husbands had control over all property and wealth. Because women could not vote, and the home was deviating from holding its former political/public functions, women were also kept away from making political decisions. Further, women were kept from becoming intellectual, because they were often restricted from entering academic male spaces, like the libraries and offices (Spain 134).

Having examined, in brief, some of the gendered influences brought forth by Victorian social ideologies, Darwinism and industrialism in particular, I will bring the reader on a tour of the specific Victorian Queen Anne home, as it is depicted in the floor plans made available to me. I’ll

begin by entering the house from the front porch. The first room any guest must encounter, the room that acts as the threshold to the rest of the house, is the reception room. Clifford Clark, in his text, *The American Family Home* and Daphne Spain, in her work, *Gendered Space*, indicate that this reception room might, in fact, be synonymous with a “front parlor.” This space would have been public, open to all guests—men, women, children, friends, family, and even many employees, delivery people, and other service-oriented helpers. It would have been an ornate public entryway; Clark notes, “On the first floor the location of the front parlor and the elaborate suggestions for its furnishings implied that the parlor was to be a place for social interaction and display rather than for relaxation. Here the family could converse with friends, and the great transition moments in life—births, baptisms, graduations, weddings, and even funerals—could be celebrated with appropriate dignity” (42). The parlor had to be a hospitable place where the family could enjoy company. At the same time, the parlor could not be *too* inviting, because any unwelcome guests, probably guests of color or of lower class, might become too comfortable and stay for too long.

According to this house’s floor plan, there is no stairway or other immediate access to the rest of the house from the front parlor. This would have likely been to keep the unwanted strangers and general, unfamiliar public out of the private lives of the family. Further, any stairway extending from the front parlor/reception room would have been extremely taboo; a stairway would hint at the upstairs, which would insinuate the events that occur in sleeping quarters and give away too much private information about the lives of the family, especially about the women. Women’s purity was to be preserved through modesty and privacy; any hindrance to that—like a stairway or a more open floor plan—would have jeopardized the purity of the women in the house. In fact, women were not to even descend downstairs to meet guests until they had received the formal visitor’s card that was an essential item of communication and invitation for the Victorians (Clark 42). Clearly, this preoccupation with women’s purity and modesty was a major limitation in the everyday lives, as well as public, social, and intellectual progress, of Victorian women.

Furthermore, the front parlor, or reception room, would have functioned as an intermediary zone by which guests and the family could communicate and negotiate. “[The front parlor] served as a vehicle for managing social relations. It had to be large enough to accommodate several visitors and give them a sense of the quality of the house. But it also was a place where people of different social statuses might interact on a more formal basis. The hall added ornamentation to everyday life and revealed the importance of material possessions as indicators of the quality of life. As [Kenneth Ames] has suggested, the hall was ‘space which was neither wholly interior nor exterior, but a sheltered testing zone which some passed through with ease and others never went beyond’” (Clark 45). Guests, then, would either be rejected by the family, probably due to clash in social status, class, race, or gender, or they would be invited in to see the rest of the house and visit with the hospitable family.

If a guest were invited into the rest of the house, s/he would next encounter the main (back) parlor. This parlor would have been used for the express purposes of the family, probably primarily as a means of entertainment (music, handiwork, female crafts). This room would have been open only to a limited number of people, selected by the family according to appropriate class, race, status, and social relation to the family. The parlor, then, probably would have restricted people of color and people of lower class than the family. It would have been a place for people of like-status and social position to the family to enjoy one another’s company.

Along with the floor plan materials which I have examined, I have a photograph of an interior of a parlor that might have been appropriate for the inside of the house to which I have been referring. There are many details within this photograph that imply some important conclusions. First, the furniture is very attention-drawing in the picture. There are three stuffed chairs covered with dark, heavy, perhaps crushed velvet, upholstery. These chairs are trimmed with spiraled, apparently gold ropelike fringe, which borders the bottoms of the arms as well as the base of the chairs. One of these chairs is situated next to the fireplace of the parlor, while the other two sit in



















