

Katarzyna Biela

ORCID: 0000-0002-7392-2546
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

“Woman of Nowhere”: House and Home in Claire-Louise Bennett’s Prose

„Kobieta znikąd”: motyw domu w prozie Claire-Louise Bennett

Abstract

The paper discusses the motif of house and home in the prose of Claire-Louise Bennett, an English contemporary author settled in Ireland. It explores different housing configurations she represents along her oeuvre and especially in her debut short story collection, *Pond* (2015), in her subsequent novel *Checkout 19* (2021) and in the short story “Invisible Bird,” published in *The New Yorker* (2022). These configurations vary from shared accommodation and renting to the extreme of homelessness. Considering Bennett’s representations of diverse housing schemes, the article discusses her prose as a commentary on the Irish housing crisis and, more broadly, the global housing situation. It unravels how dictionary definitions presenting home as a stable base become destabilised in her prose while the focus shifts towards increased mobility. The narrators – notably, women – seem to find peace in being on the move, treating their situation as an opportunity to reconsider their freedom, identity, priorities and preferences. Hence, the article proposes that the phrase “woman out of nowhere,” used to describe the narrator in Bennett’s novel, *Checkout 19*, seems to suit most of Bennett’s narrators. Drawing on Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*, revealing home to be an intimate space for cherishing one’s dreams, as well as on contemporary studies concerned with housing,

mobility and nomadology, the paper examines how Bennett's prose, while registering the alarming housing issues, encourages distancing oneself from conventional views on house and home and seeking solace in transformation. Moreover, Bennett seems to be revisioning the role of women in the contemporary society by including a single creative woman who lives independently among possible and valuable social roles.

Keywords: Claire-Louise Bennett, English literature, contemporary literature, housing studies, Ireland, migration, women's literature.

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest zbadanie motywu domu w prozie Claire-Louise Bennett, współczesnej angielskiej autorki mieszkającej w Irlandii. Artykuł prezentuje różnorodne formy zamieszkania przedstawione w twórczości Bennett, szczególnie w debiutanckim zbiorze opowiadań, *Pond* (2015), w opublikowanej później powieści *Checkout 19* (2021) oraz w opowiadaniu „Invisible Bird”, wydanym na łamach *The New Yorker* (2022). Formy te obejmują spektrum rozwiązań od współdzielenia mieszkania i wynajmu aż po skrajność w postaci bezdomności. Biorąc pod uwagę różnorodność form zdomowienia w prozie Bennett, artykuł ujmuje jej prozę jako komentarz do irlandzkiego kryzysu mieszkaniowego, a także, szerzej, do globalnych problemów mieszkaniowych. Ukazano, jak słownikowe pojęcie domu jako stabilnego schronienia zostaje w jej prozie zakwestionowane, podczas gdy coraz więcej uwagi kieruje się w stronę mobilności. Narratorki – co ważne, kobiece – zdają się odnajdywać spokój w ruchu, postrzegając swoją sytuację jako okazję do refleksji nad wolnością, tożsamością, priorytetami i preferencjami. Z tego względu artykuł sugeruje, że określenie „kobiety znikąd”, użyte do opisu narratorki w powieści Bennett, *Checkout 19*, w zasadzie pasuje do większości jej narratorek. Odwołując się do *Poetyki przestrzeni* Gastona Bachelarda, gdzie traktuje on dom jako intymną przestrzeń do refleksji nad marzeniami, a także do aktualnych badań z zakresu *housing studies*, mobilności i nomadologii, artykuł uwidacznia, jak proza Bennett rejestruje naglące problemy mieszkaniowe, jednocześnie zachęcając do zachowania dystansu wobec konwencjonalnego pojęcia domu i do poszukiwania ukojenia w przemianie. Co więcej, Bennett zdaje się przepisywać rolę kobiety we współczesnym społeczeństwie, traktując mieszkającą niezależnie od innych kobietę singielkę i artystkę jako jedną z możliwych i cennych ról społecznych.

Słowa kluczowe: Claire-Louise Bennett, literatura angielska, literatura współczesna, *housing studies*, Irlandia, migracja, literatura kobieca.

Introduction

When I visited Dublin in June 2025, it surprised me that the celebration of Bloomsday was directly followed by a housing protest planned for June 17th, as announced on posters attached to streetlamps (See: Fig. 1). Having a safe place to stay is one of the most fundamental human needs – as Ewa Kowal puts it, shortly and clearly, “few ideas are as universally key, basic, and primal as ‘home’¹” – and yet Ireland seems to continuously struggle to accommodate its people.



Figure 1. Dublin, 16 June 2025. Photo: Katarzyna Biela.

Claire-Louise Bennett, an English writer now settled in Ireland, awarded the inaugural White Review Short Story Prize and shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize, is one of the authors who respond to the Irish housing crisis and its influence on people. Much of her prose is settled

1 Ewa Kowal, “Under Construction: A Brief Introduction to Housing Studies,” in *The Many Meanings of Home. Cultural Representations of Housing Across Media*, eds. Ewa Kowal and Izabela Curyłło-Klag (Paderborn: Brill Fink, 2022), xi.

in Ireland, or along the route between Ireland and England, mirroring her own experience of migration from the UK to the Emerald Island. Her debut short story collection, *Pond*², tells a story of an Englishwoman newly arrived in an unnamed Irish village, where she attempts to make herself at home in a rented flat. Selected reminisces of the relocation are likewise part of her second novel, *Checkout 19*³, a coming-of-age story showcasing different periods of a writer's life. The short story "Invisible Bird,"⁴ published in *The New Yorker*, is in turn one of the most prominent renditions of the housing motif in her oeuvre, concentrated around a couple who struggle to settle in Dublin after finishing university. Even though Bennett settled in Ireland a long time ago, it may be that her migration experience and the fact that she moved as an adult, having spent a significant part of her life in England, allows her to take a fresh look of a newcomer, sensitive towards Irish housing issues.

At the same time, Bennett never fails to be mindful of the more global perspective and the affect that accompanies contemporary quests for home on a universal scale. Reading her prose, one cannot help but wonder about the consequences of questioning and destabilising the fundamental notions of house and home. She rethinks and redefines these concepts, so that they become flexible, continuously modifiable, almost as if they existed in flux. She seems to tease the Oxford English Dictionary definition of the house as "a building for human habitation, typically and historically one that is the ordinary place of residence"⁵ and of home as "a dwelling place; a person's house or abode; the fixed residence of a family or household; the seat of domestic life and interests."⁶ She does so by representing houses that are neither "ordinary" nor "fixed," which testifies to the contemporary global insecurity and the way the conventional understanding of home has had to change. This serves as an invitation to search for new meanings of human dwelling places and to reflect on and ask questions about the contemporary sense of belonging.

Hence, intertwining the two perspectives – the local and the global – Bennett remains a witness of the socioeconomic situation of Ireland, who is simultaneously open toward universal feelings and concerns. Given

2 Claire-Louise Bennett, *Pond* (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2017 [2015]).

3 Claire-Louise Bennett, *Checkout 19* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2021).

4 Claire-Louise Bennett, "Invisible Bird," *New Yorker*, May 23, 2022. Accessed May 11, 2026. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/30/invisible-bird>

5 "House (n.1 & int.)," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2024. Accessed May 11, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3413887183>

6 "Home, n. (1) & adj.," *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2025. Accessed May 11, 2026. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9487569112>

the importance of the themes of home and migration – both for her oeuvre and contemporary studies in general⁷ – in this paper I would like to present Bennett as an attentive observer of today's modes of living in Ireland as well as the transformations that accompany contemporary housing on a larger scale. Therefore, I am referring both to sources concerning Ireland specifically and studies carried out in other countries. Importantly, though much aware of political and economic concerns, Bennett is not thoroughly pessimistic in her approach to the current precarious housing situation but rather searches for ways to treat mobility as a means of self-discovery. This makes the analysis of her prose even more interesting and necessary, for we are much in need of strategies that may help us endure insecurity and open us up towards balance and self-comprehension.

Probably the most prominent house-related motif in Bennett's prose is that of moving houses. Her prose features an extensive catalogue of accommodation rented, shared, being looked for, even temporarily rejected when in "Invisible Bird" the characters sleep rough for a period of time. It makes an impression that her narrators – notably women – are constantly on the move, in search of what they could call their place in the world. As in Bennett's prose houses tend to be connected to her narrators and their situation, her work is in line with sources that approach the house as a place testifying to the identity of its dweller. Oscar Hansen has already seen architecture as an event and buildings as sites constructed for the purpose of movement and interaction.⁸ This perspective – away from the static edifice, towards the inhabitant – appears convincing for many, even if in different contexts. For Barrie, for instance, the house functions as a material illustration of the human condition and experience. As he contends, "house and home are far from a fixed subject, but a means by which the roles the built environment plays in representing the human experience can be effectively conceptualized [...] Architecture, like literature, is a predominant cultural output and, as such, can,

7 For example, Barrie notes that the notion of home is ubiquitous, while Smyth and Croft point out that due to such an omnipresence, one may struggle to stay objective in research, because their private life, with the image of the home they return to after work or a new house they want to move into, involuntarily slips into any housing-related discussion. See: Thomas Barrie, *House and Home: Cultural Contexts, Ontological Roles* (London-New York: Routledge, 2017), xix; Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft, "Introduction: Culture and Domestic Space," in *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*, eds. Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 11–12.

8 Oscar Hansen, "Open Form in Architecture—The Art of the Great Number," in *Open Form: Space, Interaction, and the Tradition of Oskar Hansen*, eds. Axel Wieder and Florian Zeyfang (London: Sternberg Press, 2014), 43–51.

does, and has served related cultural purposes of materializing our all too human condition.”⁹ Atkinson and Jacobs, in turn, ask the reader to picture a house in their mind to conclude that the commonly described combination of a square with windows, doors, a roof and a chimney discloses that each person is a part of a particular society: “This suggests something about the power of shared ideas, social values, and our impressions of the home that is preferred and which we aspire to own.”¹⁰

In a similar vein, Bennett’s representation of houses speaks volumes about the narrators who describe them as well as the stage their life is at. Exploring the house and home motif in her prose can help comprehend how her narrators orient themselves in the world and how they understand their surroundings. Their worldview proves different from what those living permanently in one place are accustomed to, making Bennett’s approach significantly tolerant towards transformation and mobility. Hence, one should ask more specifically what kind of women move houses in Bennett’s work: what the houses tell about them and their relationships with other people. This question somehow inherently accompanies the exploration of the house and home motif in her prose.

The Question Of Bachelard’s Poetics

Upon proceeding to a more detailed analysis of Claire-Louise Bennett’s houses, it is impossible to ignore the understanding of home as proposed by Gaston Bachelard. Bennett includes a quote from *The Poetics of Space* as an epigraph in her debut, *Pond*, and since then her continuously changing settings will be suited to Bachelard’s approach. In his view, the house becomes an intimate space, frequently connected to childhood memories. The physical dimensions play a secondary role; he is more interested in how people understand and conceive of the house, how they feel when they think about it, what it means to them or what it may symbolise. As he contends, “[a]ll great, simple images reveal a psychic state. The house, even more than the landscape, is a ‘psychic state,’ and even when reproduced as it appears from the outside, it bespeaks intimacy.”¹¹ Importantly, the house, in its intimate safety, makes

9 Barrie, *House and Home*, xxiv.

10 Rowland Atkinson and Keith Jacobs, *House, Home and Society* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022 [First published by Palgrave, 2016]), 5.

11 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space. The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 72.

space for imagination and dreaming: "If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace [...] the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind."¹² Bennett in her house descriptions leans towards such an understanding and employs the representation of homes to provide an insight into the narrators' psyche.

However, Bachelard has been likewise critiqued, for example, by Joe Moran, who stresses that *The Poetics of Space* was written in particular social and political circumstances, which, though somewhat left aside by Bachelard, bear significant influence on his argument. Moran sees Bachelard as situated in preindustrial Europe, sceptical towards the Parisian suburbs and modernity:

Bachelard's disregard for the unfortunate pedestrian is telling, because it suggests that his oneiric house represents a retreat not only from the harsh elements but from the social sphere – after all, intimate space is 'space that is not open to just anybody'. In effect, he turns a potentially political critique of the planned housing built for the working classes in the postwar period into an implicit championing of private property over the 'house on streets where we have only lived as transients'.¹³

Moran opts for a more practical view on the house and disapproves of Bachelard's strong reliance on the past:

Our attachment to houses in Western culture has more to do with the mundane and ongoing activities of daily life than with an idealised past. It is true that houses provide us with a sense that the past can be preserved within the stable confines of their solid walls. But the house is not fixed forever by its site and structure: it is also an evolving entity of layered residues and accretions, responsive to the subtle modifications of habitual experience.¹⁴

He agrees that the house connotes the physical entity with ephemeral qualities and that memory is responsible for it being so culturally significant yet warns against detaching these from the social situation.¹⁵

¹² *Ibidem*, 6.

¹³ Joe Moran, "Houses, Habit and Memory," in *Our House: The Representation of Domestic Space in Modern Culture*, eds. Gerry Smyth and Jo Croft (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 31.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 42.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Another counterargument is that Bachelard's perspective is very cosy, which some view as limited in the way it does not include instances of abuse, conflicts and danger that are inherent in the experience of certain household members. Sibley describes it as a "happy phenomenology of the home"¹⁶ and his stance is further referenced by David Morley¹⁷ and Ewa Kowal.¹⁸

Referring this discussion to Bennett, one must aim to find a middle ground. In her fictional realms, houses are, to quote Moran again, "evolving entities" and she writes extensively about "the mundane and ongoing activities of daily life." She also takes the Irish socioeconomic context into account, suggesting a specific spatiotemporal perspective. Yet at the same time she makes space for the dreamlike and presents her narrators as displaced or alienated from their social context, as if agreeing on the Bachelardian degree of abstraction. Hence, while the critique of Bachelard remains informative and worth considering, his view cannot be dismissed from the analysis of Bennett's homes.

Shared Accommodation

Bennett's prose presents a catalogue of different kinds of houses, few of which are actually owned by the narrators. *Checkout 19*, a coming-of-age novel presenting experiences characteristic of different stages in life, parallelly presents different types of shared accommodation. While at the university, the narrator stays in a dormitory, surrounded by fellow students in adjacent rooms.¹⁹ At some point, during an unexpected, apologetic call from Dale – someone occupying an unspecified place on the friend-lover scale – she decides to go on a short trip and stay at his family home while he and his parents are away.²⁰ She feels like taking a break from London as she realises that she owes rent and, both her financial situation and her future being unclear, she might soon need to return to her hometown.²¹ This is not her first spontaneous

16 David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London: Routledge, 1995), 94.

17 David Morley, *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity* (London-New York: Routledge, 2006), 56.

18 Kowal, *Under Construction*, xvii.

19 Bennett, *Checkout 19*, 185–191.

20 *Ibidem*, 190–200.

21 *Ibidem*, 190.

trip – previously, she described a trip to Brighton, where she stayed in a hotel and wondered about the British post-war experimental novelist, Ann Quin²² – so it begins to seem that an occasional urge to escape is a part of her personality.

Despite her fancy for excursions, staying in a house belonging to Dale's family during the absence of its owners brings about a dose of awkwardness:

Dale and his parents left the following morning. Probably at the same time. They were probably taking the same train. I felt left behind when they all departed. London seemed very appealing all of a sudden and I had to make myself be quiet as the three of them walked off towards the station. I could do what I liked but I couldn't really.²³

At the end of the novel, the awkwardness continues in a new form as the narrator carries on with her writing while living in a new place, above a family with children, whose lifestyle greatly differs from her own. The use of the plural pronoun²⁴ to describe the experience is intriguing, as if suggesting that the narrator is not exactly at peace and needs to explain the situation to herself or somehow multiply her consciousness to counteract solitude:

We couldn't help but think of the two young daughters and we didn't like the idea one bit of night after night being up in that attic with two bottles of beer and a block of cheddar and cream crackers sliding off a plate onto the nice rug while the two daughters were in their pretty single beds just there on the floor below us. And surely they'd soon wonder why a woman of our years had come out of nowhere and installed herself at the top of their house and creaked around late into the night.²⁵

It may then seem that the narrator finds what she needs when she moves, but once she arrives and settles, uneasy thoughts of displacement are intrusive, making her feel different from other people, as if unable to fit in.

"Invisible Bird" likewise touches upon shared accommodation while the narrator and her boyfriend try to find their place in Dublin, where

²² *Ibidem*, 173–181.

²³ *Ibidem*, 193.

²⁴ The plural pronoun has become one of the characteristic features of Bennett's prose, recurring in her different works. Given Bennett's interest in Ann Quin, it may also be a form of an intertextual dialogue with the experimental novelist, who would also frequently switch between different grammatical persons.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 207.

they moved after finishing university courses. Unable to afford a house of their own, they stay with another couple, Kevin and Anne. This is far from the scenario they have been dreaming about and living together as a four results in a tense, exhausting atmosphere. The comparison of the flat with the theatrical kitchen-sink set suggests it must appear almost artificial to the narrator, revealing her existence at the time as fragile and marked by temporariness:

Kenny and Anna's flat didn't have a single window, not one, and instead of walls there were thin partitions so it was like a theatre set for a simmering kitchen-sink drama. It wasn't very restful – all you could do was look at each other or down at the marked floor. Nothing felt natural.²⁶

The lack of privacy and space to relax makes it seem that the accommodation does not serve the basic purpose of a recluse and a safe retreat from the outside world. Instead, the house itself and the interactions forced inside become an obstacle: "There was an illusion of solidarity – really the underlying current was entirely factious. The atmosphere felt unyielding yet unbearably combustible. It was only a matter of time before one of us exploded."²⁷ Read from the biographical angle, the theatrical comparison seems even more limiting – the theatre circle and a PhD dissertation in the field were exactly what Bennett gave up on and left in England before settling in Ireland.²⁸ No wonder then that due to the adverse conditions, the narrator of "Invisible Bird" and her boyfriend occasionally book a night in a hostel or even prefer to sleep rough. As a whole, the story lets itself be read as a quest for a home, which in the end they do find, but cannot sustain for a longer period of time. As one learns from the narrator towards the conclusion of the story, they have split up in unknown circumstances after renting a flat of their own.

It is then the unstable house, the activity of moving and different configurations of sharing that stand for the condition of the narrators in Bennett's prose. This corresponds to tendencies observable in the contemporary world, as identified by Morley, who speaks of migrants and cultural nomads: "Images abound of our supposedly de-territorialised culture of 'homelessness': images of exile, diaspora, time-space compression, migrancy and 'nomadology.' The concept of home often remains

26 Bennett, *Invisible Bird*, par. 7.

27 *Ibidem*.

28 Philip Maughan, "The Mind in Solitude: An Interview with Claire-Louise Bennett," *The Paris Review*, July 18, 2016. Accessed August 21, 2026. <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/07/18/the-mind-in-solitude-an-interview-with-claire-louise-bennett/>

as the uninterrogated anchor or alter ego of all this hyper-mobility. Certainly, traditional ideas of home, homeland and nation have been destabilised."²⁹ On a similar note, Elia Petridou contends that these days the home is better studied not as a single place, but as a set of practices, memories and thoughts:

In an era of increased mobility, studying the home within a defined space becomes even more problematic as it limits its use as an analytical tool and provides little conceptual weight. According to Berger, during exile, emigration, tourism and other forms of mobility, which constitute 'the quintessential experience' of our age, the concept of home can be realized in sets of practices, styles of dress and address, in memories and myths, in words and jokes.³⁰

Bennett's prose reflects such an understanding of contemporaneity in the way that it often reveals the four walls as essentially uncomfortable. They do not straightforwardly stand for predictability and security – qualities many would like to see reflected in the place they live in. Bennett's perspective plays with that of Barrie's, for whom house and home "fundamentally signify the human need to create and inhabit a defined place in the world."³¹ The juxtaposition of Barrie's adjective "defined" with Bennett's mobility discloses the ambiguity inherent to her works: the flexibility that is both scary and exciting. If the narrators cannot settle in one place nor find one single space that could prove safe and satisfying, it is the move and change that guarantee security and allow to hope that what they could call their safe harbour is yet awaiting. Though they cannot find it just now, it must be around the corner and will be found in an unspecified future. Or, in Bachelard's words, mobility guarantees the possibility of dreaming:

Housed everywhere but nowhere shut in, this is the motto of the dreamer of dwellings. In the last house as well as in the actual house, the dream of inhabiting is thwarted. A daydream of elsewhere should be open therefore, at all times. An excellent exercise for the function of inhabiting the dream house consists in taking a train trip. Such a voyage unreels a film of houses that are dreamed, accepted and refused, without our ever having been tempted to stop, as we are when motoring.³²

29 Morley, *Home Territories*, 2–3.

30 Elia Petridou, "The Taste of Home," in *Home Possessions. Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 2021), 88.

31 Barrie, *House and Home*, xix.

32 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 62.

Constant transformation of the narrators' housing situation connotes insecurity, yet Bennett simultaneously encourages to view it as essentially positive: she remains open-minded and oriented towards acceptance. If, as Barrie proposes, house and home "embody a sense of being in the world and express understandings of the world and, in doing so, facilitate a homecoming to the world,"³³ then in Bennett's prose the narrators comprehend themselves, their existence and position through moving houses. Their place in the world is not "defined," but being defined. The "need to create and inhabit"³⁴ a place may drive the narratives but is never fully satisfied.

Renting

A more specific instance of being on the move is illustrated in *Pond* through the act of renting. The narrator stays in a flat in an Irish village, her position presented as a tentative stage between permanent occupation and instability. The shed is packed with her belongings³⁵ and she is the one who engages in redecorations and keeps an eye on thatchers at work ("The Gloves Are Off"). When she is alone, she wonders how she would arrange the interior for a party ("Finishing Touch") or ponders extensively on her housing rituals and habits ("Morning, Noon and Night"), which testifies to her need to control the place that – as it becomes apparent – plays a significant role in her life. Yet eventually it is also clear that the flat does not belong to her. Selected passages are devoted to her discussing the house issues with the landlady, revealing a dose of insecurity brought in by the presence of the owner:

Three days ago, for example, she came to my door and asked me about two large bags of empty bottles which have nothing to do with me, but of course one has to be very careful about how one communicates that something has nothing to do with one so as not to get the people it has everything to do with into hot water.³⁶

33 Barrie, *House and Home*, 3. Barrie states also that "[t]he house has also been described as a 'third skin,' an outer layer that, in addition to a person's body and clothing, provides a center for their lives while also projecting their self-image" and concludes that home is "not as much about a place, as it is finding a place in the world" (*Ibidem*, 17).

34 *Ibidem*, xix.

35 Bennett, *Pond*, 107–109.

36 *Ibidem*, 107–108.

Further, in one of the closing stories, "Lady of the House," it turns out that the landlady must put her cottages on the market, which means the narrator has no option but to leave. This makes her consider a journey to a yet unspecified place in Europe: "my plan now is to really throw in the towel and go to Brazilmysorebalimontanatrondheimnyonsbristol, as soon as my lease is up."³⁷ Such musings disclose that she is in constant search for where she belongs or where she lost her heart.³⁸

Read with the house and home motif in mind, *Pond* connects the question of stability with possessing, in this way adding another layer to Bennett's representation of homes. In their sociological discussion of housing, Atkinson and Jacobs note that renting is usually evaluated through the lens of a particular country's political and economic situation, yet most often it is ownership that appears to be desired: "The promotion of what many perceive as a natural tenure has come to mean that many people see ownership as natural and renting as a form of social deviation."³⁹ This is strengthened by increasing difficulties in obtaining houses that selected countries struggle with⁴⁰. Times of hardship and associated obstacles remind people of the value of security:

Following many decades of a steady rise in home ownership in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, access to ownership has now fallen dramatically, particularly for younger people. These new risks, of repossession, default, and even homelessness, help demonstrate how our home and its relative stability are critical to us; new forms of precariousness in our work lives highlight this.⁴¹

Richard Waldron locates the shift from owning to renting in the 2000s, treating 2008 as the outset. He picks Ireland as his case study to examine housing precarity and the influence of the crisis on wellbeing. As he points out, "Ireland is a particularly revealing case for international comparison, considering its traditional emphasis on homeownership expansion and the extent of the shift toward the private rental sector following a spectacular housing market collapse."⁴² To put it in numbers, "[b]etween 2006 and 2016, the share of private renters increased from

37 *Ibidem*, 165, original spelling.

38 *Ibidem*, 140.

39 Atkinson and Jacobs, *House, Home and Society*, 3.

40 *Ibidem*.

41 *Ibidem*.

42 Richard Waldron, "Generation Rent and Housing Precarity in 'Post Crisis' Ireland," *Housing Studies* 38 (2023): 181–205.

11% to 18% of households, while the share of homeowners declined.”⁴³ From a psychological point of view, the housing situation of a person or family is frequently regarded an indicator of success.⁴⁴ Possessing a place of one’s own satisfies emotional needs: “Owning is an innate human preference precisely because of the way that this tenure might be more able to respond to the deep emotional and psychological needs of individuals.”⁴⁵ Consequently, the insecurity of renting results in poorer mental health, decreased self-worth and doubts about family formation.⁴⁶

The temporary nature of renting in *Pond* may thus be seen as a source of anxiety and displacement, grounded in sociological expectations the narrator cannot meet. In addition to being dependent on the landlady, there are moments when the narrator feels anxious in her flat, e.g. in “Words Escape Me,” where the walls seem not to guarantee enough safety, both in the face of the outside world or the narrator’s own thoughts. Thus, her insecure housing situation could explain the narrator’s withdrawal from social interactions and her interest in solitude. On the other hand, however, if one takes the reason for the narrator’s relocation into account, renting a flat in Ireland seems to be a pleasurable, even therapeutic escape: the woman has left the academic world, the unfulfilled romantic relationship and England behind and is granted space for reorienting her priorities and self-(re)discovery. Like in “To A God Unknown,” where she relates: “The storm carried on into dusk and I stood in my bathrobe at the big window and held onto a cup and saucer with both hands. *I knew exactly what was going on.*”⁴⁷

In this sense, Bennett’s prose illustrates what Jean-Sebastien Marcoux found out in his sociological study in Montreal – that being on the move brings lightness and freedom: “Indeed, moving is sometimes taken to lead to detachment, as if it were leading to a superior state, nearly a state of spiritual elevation.”⁴⁸ In other words, ownership may not be the top priority in the circumstances the narrator in *Pond* finds herself in. Bennett’s debut lets go of the economic approach to housing, privileging the intimate perspective, sensitive towards a specific, dynamic and changing

43 *Ibidem*, 188.

44 Atkinson and Jacobs, *House, Home and Society*, 33.

45 *Ibidem*, 21.

46 Waldron, *Generation Rent*, 184–185.

47 Bennett, *Pond*, 66, my emphasis.

48 Jean-Sebastien Marcoux, “The Refurbishment of Memory 1,” in *Home Possessions. Material Culture Behind Closed Doors*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 2021), 82.

situation of the narrator. In her world, success is determined differently, if it matters at all.

Homelessness

Finally, Bennett stops to reflect on the very extreme housing situation when in "Invisible Bird" she renders the narrator and her boyfriend homeless for a period of time. What is interesting about this rendition of homelessness is that it is not a state the protagonists are unwillingly thrown into, but a condition they consciously choose: they sleep rough in order to escape staying with Kevin and Anne and the dependence on them as the flat owners. Due to money shortage the narrator and her boyfriend cannot afford a flat of their own and are forced to search for alternatives. It is then their conscious decision rather than necessity to find shelter outside of the four walls. Moreover, the narrator is quite ambivalent towards homelessness in the way that she balances obvious discomfort with fortunate circumstances. The weather is unpleasant, yet they have found an entrance that prevents them from the rain. They sleep rough, yet the nights are quiet enough to let them hear otherwise barely noticeable sounds, such as the creaking of "an antiquated shop sign."⁴⁹ This is also the moment in the story where the eponymous Proustian "invisible bird" is referenced as a creature who out of pressing solitude was trying to speed up the time, but "received at once so unanimous an answer, so powerful a repercussion of silence and immobility, that one felt it had arrested for all eternity the moment which it had been trying to make pass more quickly."⁵⁰ In effect, or perhaps paradoxically, homelessness brings peace. As the narrator concludes, "When, finally, I put my head down on our rucksack in order to get some sleep, I would feel the iconic glass corners of my perfume bottle prodding into the base of my skull, pervading the slowing thoughts going on inside it with a golden pellucidity that melted away any feelings of discomfort entirely."⁵¹ It is a peculiar kind of homelessness because it is chosen, limited in time and they are not entirely excluded from possessing at least selected goods, such as a perfume bottle.

In fact, as Atkinson and Jacobs prove, homelessness comes in different shapes, not only the most obvious staying in the streets, but also living

49 Bennett, *Invisible Bird*, par. 11.

50 *Ibidem*.

51 *Ibidem*.

in run-down or ill-fitted accommodation or occupying spare space in someone else's house:

The question of what counts as being homeless is a critical problem in its own right. Many people traditionally think of homelessness in terms of people sleeping rough. This is only one manifestation of the problem. Homelessness covers unfit habitation of various sorts: people finding shelter in derelict buildings, squatting, living permanently in structures designed for short-term use only, caravans, tents – the list goes on. Importantly, it is equally possible to be without one's own home and live by 'sofa surfing,' sleeping on people's floors or empty spaces.⁵²

From such a perspective, the narrator of "Invisible Bird" and her boyfriend are permanently homeless in various ways until towards the end of the story they can finally rent a flat (even if for a limited period of time, until they part ways). This even further validates the reading of the story as a quest for home. Bennett alarmingly discloses the scope of homelessness in Dublin and how it may affect the young who have not yet managed to secure their jobs after finishing their university degrees. With such a representation of homelessness, the short story aligns with the sociological take on the issue. Lima, Hearne and Murphy observe a homelessness crisis in Ireland since 2010: "New presentations of families becoming homeless started to increase from 2013 onwards, following, and in parallel to, the trend of rapidly increasing rents [...] and the increasing involvement of real estate investment funds in the Irish private rental market."⁵³ They note a stark increase in homelessness in 2014 and 2015, which proved unstoppable up to 2019.⁵⁴ According to data, "the number of adults in homeless services increased from 2,509 in July 2014 to 6,024 in July 2018, a 140% increase."⁵⁵

Given such a grim perspective, it is outstanding that the narrator of "Invisible Bird" notices bliss in their unstable condition and derives pleasure from ordinary moments, as if holding onto what is fleeting in search of freedom and peace. The narrator's balanced view on homelessness guides her towards non-obvious possibilities offered by unboundedness and independence from both the four walls and fellow inhabitants. Quite surprisingly, in "Invisible Bird," rough sleeping, however tough, brings

52 Atkinson and Jacobs, *House, Home and Society*, 61.

53 Valesca Lima, Rory Hearne, and Mary P. Murphy, "Housing Financialisation and the Creation of Homelessness in Ireland," *Housing Studies* 38 (2023): 1695–1718.

54 *Ibidem*, 1697.

55 *Ibidem*.

long-awaited relief, symbolised by the opportunity for a mindful dive into the quietness of the night. This corresponds to Barrie's observation that homelessness may be illuminating: "In some cases, the condition of homelessness can be redemptive. World mythology contains a panoply of stories regarding hero-redeemer figures and the necessity of leaving home to gain insights and benefits for others."⁵⁶ Such is the case with "Invisible Bird" which reveals a unique kind of freedom brought about by independence from a defined and stable abode. Being on the move, again, is a source of uncanny comfort and the temporariness inherent to sleeping on the perfume bottle offers acceptance, unlike staying with other people.

"Woman Out Of Nowhere"

Looking at how Bennett employs the motif of housing, it is possible to think of a few features that characterise most, if not all, of her narrators and to wonder about an archetype of a woman situated inside her transforming locale. It is certainly a woman who keeps searching for – perhaps even not a room – but a house of one's own, at the same time resisting the idea of a fixed dwelling. She might be awkward or anxious, yet she seems to be taking comfort in the flow and the possibility to continue moving. Due to frequent transfers, she has got experience in living in various places which match her life situation to a greater or lesser extent. Hence, she frequently appears to be, as the narrator in *Checkout 19* describes it, a "woman out of nowhere"⁵⁷ – a displaced stranger, like the single woman listening to children downstairs, or the temporary tenant in *Pond*, or the woman sharing a flat who wishes to escape in "Invisible Bird." Nevertheless, one has an impression that she tries to take as much advantage of the stranger's position as she can, treating it as an opportunity to reflect on freedom, independence, comfort, priorities and preferences. Bennett's prose is intimate in the way that keeping the definition of the house open enables to dream deeply about the women's place in the world. The reflections may seem greatly Bachelardian in their spirit for as he contends,

[m]aybe it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time

56 Barrie, *House and Home*, 4.

57 Bennett, *Checkout 19*, 203–207.

to achieve it. For a house that was final, one that stood in symmetrical relation to the house we were born in, would lead to thoughts – serious, sad thoughts – and not to dreams. It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality.⁵⁸

Hence, Bennett's prose, with the narrators' housing situations or – to use a sociological term – their housing pathways or careers⁵⁹, resists the common representation of a house as a place that organises a person's life. Atkinson and Jacobs write that "[i]n a rather primal sense, our home is the means by which we are able to stay safe, sheltered, and well; it plays a central role in binding various aspects of our lives together by offering a place of sanctuary and a primary place to which we can retreat and literally find a home."⁶⁰ For Bennett's narrators such a conventional scenario is hardly possible. She finds multiple ways to stay safe and sheltered, but she probably moves too frequently for any of them to bind her life together. She is at home with change, a woman unbelievably persistent in dealing with anxious circumstances, for whom mobility is the natural way of being.

This may be a resolution of the paradox that despite the insecurity Bennett presents, the reader is left with a sense of peace and comfort. Bennett revisits safety, so that it no longer concerns societal expectations one is pressed to meet, but a feeling of "being at home" that can be realised anywhere. She seems to agree with Barrie that "home is not simply a physical container of people's lives, but one they appropriate, personalize, and express themselves through. They may rent or buy a house or housing unit, but it is through occupation and personalization that the house becomes a home."⁶¹ Since Bennett's prose is focused on the narrators' psyche and therefore "personalised," it conveys the idea that it is acceptable and dreamlike not to be permanently settled.

In effect, Bennett finds numerous ways to redefine house and home. The narrators along her oeuvre constantly move, engaging in sharing, renting or even creating a temporary abode in the streets. One may read this as a commentary on the socioeconomic condition of Ireland and on the contemporary global housing issues but also as a manifestation of the narrators' psyche: the way they prioritise transformation and the state of an active self-discovery. In this sense, the narrators and their stories destabilise common presuppositions and stereotypes concentrated

58 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 61.

59 Atkinson and Jacobs, *House, Home and Society*, 11.

60 *Ibidem*, 1.

61 *Ibidem*.

around the house and home as safe and stable bases. Bennett's works are full of openness towards humans as species for whom finding their place in the world is both one of the greatest desires and greatest challenges. Being on the move and continuous change are treated here as inherent to human condition, natural and acceptable, even though societal expectations, in Ireland or elsewhere, may prove otherwise.

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