



Matej Bel University, Banská Bystrica, Slovakia
Has been issued since 2014
ISSN 1339-6773
E-ISSN 1339-875X

Home Is Where the Heart Is: Perceptions of Home in Contemporary American Short Fiction

Barbora Vinczeová

Matej Bel University, Slovakia
Department of English and American Studies
Banská Bystrica, 97401
E-mail: barbora.vinczeova@umb.sk

Abstract

The topic of home is becoming more and more interesting in modern times thanks to globalization and multiculturalism. The aim of this paper is to find out how contemporary American writers of short fiction perceive home and what does this topic relate to. We aim to present most common notions of home, focusing on cultures, traditions and countries. The framework for the stories is provided by the series Best American Short Stories published annually. To include most recent fiction, only publications since 2007 are used.

Keywords: Home; American literature; cultures; contemporary.

Introduction

The topic of home has only recently become more prominent than in the previous years. Home, being an interdisciplinary topic, borders with psychology, anthropology, and many other disciplines; however, it manifests itself also in literature. Several studies explore the concept of home, whether in literature or in connection with people's perception of home, but short fiction is lacking regarding the attention given to this topic. This paper focuses on home in contemporary American short fiction, selecting short stories for analysis from the publications The Best American Short Stories since 2007 until 2014.

Because there is no clear and exact definition of home, it may vary from being a "place (such as a house or apartment) where a person lives," (–home. Merriam-Webster, 2014), or "a place of origin" (–home. Merriam-Webster, 2014). It is possible to analyze home from many points of view – it is possible to regard it as a house, city, place, etc. However, we are focusing on stories where home is related to topics of migration, different cultures and notions of being at home versus leaving home. Our goal is to analyze these stories, compare them and draw conclusions, which will help us understand the perception of home in contemporary short fiction better.

As we already mentioned, migration and conflicting cultures will be tied closely to the notion of home. It is only inevitable that such connection arises: "Cultural studies and anthropological literature detailing the experience of migrants and refugees as well as sociological and psychological empirical research on family formation and home-leaving claim that ideas about staying, leaving and journeying are integrally associated with notions of home (Mallett, 2004, p. 77). The journey from one destination to another, or one country to another, may result not only in a necessity to embrace a new home and to leave the old one behind, but also in a situation where one regards home as more places: "a place of origin (however recent or relative) as well as a point of destination" (Mallett, 2004, p. 77). As the focus is on American short stories, there are some stories that present the United States as a home, whether in positive or negative light. Other stories have a recurring theme of a double home – the country of origin and destination, while some stories see home as one country only.

Home in Contemporary Short Fiction

The United States is a home that does not always bear positive connotations and is often a subject of prejudices. These prejudices vary from positive to negative – some characters see the US as a promised land, while others display negative attitude bordering with prejudices: “American children bring guns to school ... So try not to piss anyone off (Kyle, 2007, p. 228). As in the story by Aryn Kyle, *Allegiance* (2007), comparisons are made between the country of origin – being Great Britain – and the country of destination, the US. In this story, the US is mostly viewed as a country with worse schools than those of Great Britain, worse people, teachers, houses, etc. The prejudices are very prominent, ranging from children bringing guns to school to the US being simply an inferior country. This anti-Americanism can be seen in many more works and is usually “clearly one-sided or biased, or... based on an undifferentiated view of America and Americans” (O’Connor, 2009, p. 3). Contrary to the negative point of view, we also witness positive prejudices, where the US is an ideal home, despite having flaws, which are ignored. Such views are mostly present when comparing the US to a country deemed inferior to the US; in case of Daniel Alcarón’s *The Provincials* (2013), Mexicans see the United States as an ideal home, thinking they will find work, wives and better lives. This opinion of the US is prejudiced positively – the US is seen as a promised land where even the (American) –poor is... different (Alcarón, 2013, p. 44). These two opinions on the US rule most of the stories; there are either negative or positive stereotypes regarding the country. The strength of loathing or admiration the US receives depends on the characters, and often on their ethnic background. While British characters tend to demonize the country, in case of Mexican characters there is a blissful ignorance and naivety. The duality of home is very strong, yet contradictory – while in one case the original home is regarded as a true home, in the second case the original home is discarded for a better option. Regarding the positive portrayal of the US, the country is often seen as perfect – the negative aspects are unseen, ignored or hidden. The American dream is important in stories which see it as the best country – it often has the best people, system, etc., as in *Pa’s Darling* (2007) by Louis Auchincloss, where the father figure is “the great judge of the New York Court of Appeals, renowned sage and philosopher, author of provocative books on law and literature, and the witty deity of the Patrooms Club (Auchincloss, 2007, p. 1), having a good family, job, which all glorify the possibilities offered by the US.

The ethnic background of the characters influences the perception of home to a great amount. This influence is visible when dealing with characters with eastern, mostly Japanese/Chinese background, who have a very strong connection to the country of their origin. In Julie Otsuka’s *Diem Perdid* (2012) the US is a home embraced out of necessity – migration is a very strong issue in the story, and the characters are Japanese refugees who immigrated into the US. Japan, as the old home, remains the source of happiness, contrary to the US, which is perceived as too different. Even stronger contrast between two homes is presented in Gish Jen’s story *The Third Dumpster* (2013), where China serves as an original home, and the US as a new home. It is this story that features a refusal of the new home, as the characters are unable to adapt to a new culture even after some years. The duality of home is strong – the theme old/new home is present, while the new home is regarded as unacceptable: “...their parents were Chinese, end of story, as Morehouse liked to say. Meaning that though they had been Americans for fifty years and could no longer belay themselves hand over hand up their apartment stair rail to get to their bedroom, they nonetheless could not go into assisted living because of the food. Western food every day? Cannot eat, they said (Jen, 2013, p. 2).

The inability to adapt to the American culture is a strong theme in these stories; so is migration. Prejudices play a very strong role, as in Rebecca Makkai’s story *Painted Ocean, Painted Ship* (2010), where the author works with prejudices both against the US and against Korea. Again, we witness stereotyping: “Look, I understand that back in Korea you weren’t supposed to talk in class, but you’re at an American university now, and part of the American education is talking (Makkai, 2010, p. 178). While the Chinese/Japanese stories regard the US as a necessary evil, there are stories which accept the necessity of a new home. These relate to war, as Mark Slouka’s *The Hare’s Mask* (2011), in which the author portrays refugees from Czechoslovakia, who are grateful for the US. It is a home where Jews are not persecuted and the family can live in peace. The old home is abandoned because of the war; though unwillingly, the necessity for such action is understood and the new home is embraced.

The US as a home features in many stories; the common patterns are migration, change of home, new culture, the need to adapt to a new environment. While some stories contain prejudices on the part of the characters, these only show the various perceptions of home. For one, the US as a home is often embraced out of necessity and sharp contrasts are drawn between the old and a new home. On the other hand, the idealization of the US as a home shows that it is perceived as a perfect country by some; a promised land, and a place where the American dream can become reality. Stories with strong cultural background such as Japanese or Chinese have the strongest contrast between new and old home. It is common for the characters in these stories to show disdain of the US, to despise the American system and to linger on the things from the past, resulting in the usage of realia typical for the given culture. Also, the US is seen as a lesser culture compared to the other, older cultures: “Everything you Americans say is very funny. Nothing impresses us unless it lasts five hundred years (Alcarón, 2013, p. 51).

Let us shift the focus from the US as a home to other countries and cultures. The issues are similar to those related to the US; again, themes of migration, loss of home, new cultures, arise. There is a common pattern of acceptance of the old home, contrasting with the denial of the new home, and consequently there is a “tension between the given and the chosen, then and now, here and there” (Mallett, 2004, p. 80). The old home is usually perceived as a true home and the characters often display affection to it despite having been forced to move away. The negative perception of the US might be explained by this claim, since the US is the place of destination in most cases and therefore is regarded as a home forced upon the characters, while other countries are usually a place of origin. An example of an old home perceived as a true one is Kyle’s *Allegiance* (2007), where the author portrays characters with deep affection for their country of origin – Great Britain. This results in idolizing the country; the characters think negatively of other countries and are unable to accept a new home. The old home brings up contrast between here and there, now and then. Despite Great Britain and the US having similar cultures, at least language-wise, the gap between the two countries seems too wide, resulting in two contrasting homes. This contrast is typical for stories which feature eastern cultures, such as Japanese or Chinese. While we already mentioned the refusal of a new home, the ties to the old home are stronger than wherever else. The portrayed characters value traditions, family values, their original culture and home. Often, superstitions arise from eastern cultures; these are demonstrated in the behavior of the characters, who cling to the old way of life, refusing to adopt new norms. A Chinese couple refuses to move into a new house, because they are afraid of karma, which is again a recurring theme in stories with eastern background. The inability to “let go” of the old home also results in a refusal to learn a new language in case of an old Korean woman. It is also common for the characters to cling to the old home by remembering the traditions and by performing certain rituals which come from the original home: “... offering her ancestors a bowl of hot rice” and “...smell of incense and pickled cabbage in the kitchen” (Otsuka, 2012, p. 155). While the characters with eastern roots display great loyalty to their country of origin, be it China, Japan, or Korea, the old home in case of Mexico contradicts this trend. Paired with the US, Mexico as an original home is not seen as a country to be valued; on the contrary, the characters stress the need to leave it and to find a better life elsewhere. Compared with the eastern stories, the loyalty, traditions and longing for home are all missing; resulting in a home that is best left behind. Rejection of the original home also comes in relation with war – in case of Czechoslovakia, from where the protagonists had to escape in the US. Despite war driving them out, the rejection of home is not complete; the wish to return is still present, yet cannot be fulfilled because the life in the old home would endanger the lives of the characters.

In conclusion; a home as a country of origin is usually tied to traditions, loyalty on the side of the characters and the refusal of a new home. These features are prominent in the stories with eastern cultural background; other cultures do not seem as strong and it is easier to abandon them. The theme of loss of home is recurring, the longing for the old home as a result.

While the stories confronting two homes usually favor one or another, there are such where only one home is featured. These stories, compared to the previously mentioned ones, omit the themes of double homes, refusal to adapt to a new home or comparison of homes. They rather focus on the given home, its characteristics and its positives. Culture plays a very important role and authors often depict the foreign culture, traditions and customs. The foreign countries (as to the US) are usually the topic of these stories.

Nigeria as a home is present in more stories; in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Ceiling* (2011) this country is foreign and works differently than European countries. It is a home that gives men an opportunity to rise; however, good relations with the correct people are necessary. The author hints at corruption, which is an ever-present reality. Descriptions of culture are also very detailed, the reader is also presented with the typical realia, such as Nigerian names, or traditional clothes. The society is important to maintain a household, through society one finds a suitable wife/husband, who needs to be accepted. Nigerian culture is presented as stricter in Taiye Selasi's *The Sex Lives of African Girls* (2012), who writes that: "In the peculiar hierarchy of African households, the only rung lower than a motherless child is a childless mother" (Selasi, 2012, p. 244), thus establishing the role of a woman, who runs the household and gives birth to children. In this sense, one might find this home more preferable to a man, whose standing in society is higher. However, since the comparison between two homes is not present, there is no longing for a different home and the characters display a great measure of acceptance. It is acceptance that is a common theme for many stories – if the characters do not know any other culture, they are less likely to complain. Africa is also the topic of Téa Obreht *The Laugh* (2010), in which the author rather focuses on African nature. Savanna is a home for the characters in the story; the country is beautiful but harsh. It is a home that can be loved if one tries, nevertheless, it is dangerous. Description of nature are frequent: "The air was thick and humid, moist with the privacy of savanna darkness, the smell of birth and death and shit" (Obreht, 2010, p. 253) and sound realistic. The raw quality of this home arises from wilderness; contrary to previous African stories, we witness a focus on nature rather than society. The focus on society returns in a story about India - *The Judge's Will* (2014) by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, which is depicted as a home for an upper-class married couple. Again, description of society prevails over description of nature; the double home represented by two countries is not present and the only home is the foreign India. The trends of foreign homes continues with Karl Taro Greenfeld's *NowTrends* (2009), in which the author depicts China as home. The focus is traditions and culture, including the negative depiction of communism and bureaucracy. It is a home where bribes are a natural part of life and where money allows everything. However, this portrayal sees China as a country suffocated by the regime, while having very old and rich traditions and culture. The resulting home is complicated; it is hard to accept it, but it still has its charm.

War stories are generally related to home on multiple levels; typically, there is loss of home, searching for home, and a forcible removal of a person from their home. The loss of home results from an unwilling departure of the characters – if they want to live, they must find another place to do so. Nathan Englander's *Free Fruit for Young Widows* (2011) presents war as the catalyst for loss of home and everything it relates to: family, house, and friends. The survivors of the war cannot find peace in their old homes again and it is the new country that serves as a haven, allowing the memories to fade. Home plays a very strong role; it becomes a symbol of peace and sanity: "But home—that was the thing he held on to. Maybe his house was still there, and his bed. Maybe the cow was still giving milk, and the goats still chewing garbage, and his dog still barking at the chickens as before" (Englander, 2011, p. 95).

Conclusion

We can see that the perception of home is very wide; contemporary authors allow any country become a home. In case of the US, home is related to positive and negative prejudices; in case of the other countries, a comparison of homes often arises. Double home is a common theme in the stories; it is a result of migration and moving into another country. Culture is strongly represented in stories about home; it is a part of home that is or is not embraced. The stories depicting only one home often portray foreign or non-European countries. Acceptance plays a great role here; the characters are able to embrace their home since they do not know any other.

The US as a home is usually tied to stereotypes, such as it being the ideal country or a promised land. This perception is characteristic for stories featuring characters of for example Mexican characters, who see the US as a chance for a better life. Negative connotations arise in relation with eastern countries, such as Japan or China. The characters from so called "eastern stories" do not react positively to the US being their new home and in most cases, actively reject it, falling into the trend of anti-Americanism that O'Connor (2009) mentions.

Regarding other countries, such as Britain, and again China or Japan, the characters from the analyzed stories have very strong ties to their home as a country of origin. The most common themes of these stories are the refusal to leave home, refusal to adapt to a new home and an active struggle to keep to the traditions of the original home. Here, the comparison of homes is very strong and unfavorable in regard to the new home and country.

Home is also often related to traditions and the portrayal of a particular country's customs, society and way of life. In case of the eastern stories, these traditions include interpreting dreams, eating traditional food, or greater hierarchical differences in society than in the US or Europe. Perhaps the most foreign country is Nigeria, portrayed as unfavorable to women, dominated by men and having very strict societal hierarchy.

From these observations we can draw conclusions that home is a subjective topic; however, we notice common patterns between the stories listed above which allow us to understand home better. We can say that home is directly related to a specific country, culture and even traditions.

References:

1. "home." 2014. In *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2014. [online]. Available online: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/home>>.
2. LeBARON, Michelle. 2003. Culture and Conflict. Beyond Intractability. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. [online]. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. 2003. Available online: <<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/culture-conflict>>
3. MALLETT, S., 2004. Understanding home: A critical review of the literature. In *The Sociological Review* [online]. 2004, vol. 52, no. 1. Available at: <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2004.00442.x/pdf>>.
4. O'CONNOR, B., 2009. *The Anti-American Tradition: A literature review*. Working Paper. US Studies Centre: University of Sydney, 2009.
5. SIXSMITH, Judith. 1986. THE MEANING OF HOME: AN EXPLORATORY ENVIRONMENTAL EXPERIENCE. In *Journal of Environmental Psychology* [online]. 1986, vol. 6, no. 4. Available online: <internal-pdf://Sixsmith J-1986-J Env Psych-0655158529/Sixsmith J-1986-J Env Psych.pdf>
6. SLANÁ, Eva. 2012. The Theme of Home in Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine*. Bachelor thesis. Brno: MASARYK UNIVERSITY, Faculty of Education, Department of English Language and Literature. 2012. 47 p.
7. ZDANOWICZ, Kimberly V. 2006. ARE WE THERE YET? : MIGRATION AND HOME IN LITERATURE. Master thesis. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006, 50 p.

Sources

8. ALCARÓN, D., 2013. „The Provincials.“ In Strout, E. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2013*. [KOBO edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, pp. 1-78.
9. AUCHINCLOSS, L., 2007. „Pa's Darling.“ In King, S. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2007*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2007, pp. 1-14.
10. BROOKS, G. and PILTOR, H. (eds.), 2011. *The Best American Short Stories 2011*. [EPUB edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2011.
11. EGAN, J. and PILTOR, H. (eds.), 2014. *The Best American Short Stories 2014*. [EPUB edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2014.
12. ENGLANDER, N., 2011. „Free Fruit For Young Widows.“ In Brooks, G. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2011*. [EPUB edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2011, pp. 89-101.
13. GREENFELD, K. T., 2009. „Now Trends.“ In Sebold, A. (Ed.) and Piltor, H. (Ed.), *The Best American Short Stories 2009*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2009, pp. 75-93.
14. JHABVALA, R. P., 2014. „The Judge's Will.“ In Egan, J. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2014*. [EPUB edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2014, pp. 185-199.

15. JEN, G., 2013. „The Third Dumpster“. In Strout, E. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2013*. [KOBO edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013, pp. 1-19.
16. KING, S. and PILTOR, H. (eds.), 2007. *The Best American Short Stories 2007*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
17. KYLE, A., 2007. „Allegiance.“ In King, S. and Piltor, H. (eds.). *The Best American Short Stories 2007*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, pp. 228-248.
18. MAKKAI, R., 2010. „Painted Ocean, Painted Ship.“ In Russo, R. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2010*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2010. pp. 173-198.
19. OBREHT, T., 2010. „The Laugh.“ In Russo, R. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2010*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2010, pp. 246-263.
20. OTSUKA, J., 2012. „Diem Perdidi.“ In Perrotta, T. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2012*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012., pp. 152-162.
21. PERROTTA, T. and PILTOR, H. (eds.), 2012. *The Best American Short Stories 2012*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012.
22. RUSSO, R. and PILTOR, H. (eds.), 2010. *The Best American Short Stories 2010*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2010.
23. SEBOLD, A. and PILTOR, H. (eds.). 2009. *The Best American Short Stories 2009*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2009.
24. SELASI, T., 2012. „The Sex Lives of African Girls.“ In Perrotta, T. and Piltor, H. (eds.), *The Best American Short Stories 2012*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012, pp. 236-268.
25. STROUT, E. and PILTOR, H. (eds.), 2013. *The Best American Short Stories 2013*. [KOBO edition]. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013.