ABSTRACT

“Every nut and bolt is loose”: Unhomely Renovation in The Shipping News

In this article, I explore how acts of renovation in The Shipping News are vital to the novel’s deployment of a series of Gothic tropes. The major renovation of an abandoned house belonging to the family of Quoyle, the protagonist, is one of the novel’s central plot points. Sara Wasson tells us that ‘Gothic sites are regularly threatened by a return of old horror or atavistic decline’ (2013, 132) and the house in this novel appears as an overtly Gothic space that contains traces of many traumatic events in the current, recent and long-past lives of the family that has always inhabited it. In acquiescing to his aunt’s insistence at the beginning of the novel that they renovate and live in the house, Quoyle unwittingly becomes the recipient of the dark inheritance of the green house and the many violent acts that have been committed there.

In my textual analysis of The Shipping News I examine how the uncanny effects of renovation are represented in Proulx’s work, which is not positioned to be read as a Gothic novel, but which incorporates a number of Gothic tropes, the renovation plot being the most extensive and overt of these. I also discuss the Gothic distortions of perspective and scale (Reynolds 2013, 89) that take place on a physical and psychological level throughout the renovation, as well as Proulx’s fragmentary, imagistic evocation of the house as a powerful figure of unhomely agency that complicates and endangers the redemptive process of Quoyle’s self-renewal.

KEYWORDS

Uncanny, renovation, The Shipping News, Annie Proulx
“Every nut and bolt is loose”: Unhomely Renovation in *The Shipping News*

“...renovation does not, ultimately, know what it is bringing back – or what it is destroying – when it restores the references or fragments of elusive memories.”

—*The Practice of Everyday Life*

(de Certeau 1984, 143)

Nicole Reynolds argues that the “archetypal Gothic plot can be said to have its origins in the fate of a house: real and imagined, architectural and ancestral” (2013, 92). *The Shipping News* is one of a number of American novels from the last 50 years in which acts of home improvement become the catalyst for a series of traumatic events. Novels like Ira Levin’s *Rosemary’s Baby* (1967), Andre Dubus III’s *House of Sand and Fog* (1999) and Jennifer Egan’s *The Keep* (2006) demonstrate a continuing tradition of linking acts of home improvement with the eruption of the traumatic past into the present. In this article I explore how acts of renovation in *The Shipping News* are vital to the novel’s deployment of a series of Gothic tropes. I examine how the uncanny effects of renovation are represented in Proulx’s work, which is not positioned to be read as a Gothic novel, but which incorporates a number of Gothic elements, the renovation plot being the most extensive and overt of these.

*The Shipping News* is largely a literary novel of transformation and redemption; it is not typically read as an example of Gothic literature. However, the novel’s richly evocative and imagistic language, the haunting, recurring narratives of past trauma and the warped, forbidding house itself are all fundamentally Gothic elements. In this case study of Proulx’s novel I examine the renovation plot as well as a number of other Gothic resonances in the text, such as the uncanny community of renovators and builders that interrupt Quoyle’s attempts at renovation with stories and folk tales about the instability of built structures, and the uncannily poetic, fragmentary language that refuses to allow the reader an accessibility that the otherwise straightforward, linear narrative would supply.

A number of other collections and short stories, such as Charlaine Harris and Toni Kelner’s *Home Improvement: Undead Edition* (2011) explicitly link popular culture, the Gothic and renovated spaces in response to the boom in popularity of home improvement in television and digital media. My interest in Proulx’s work stems from the fact that although narratives of redemption and rehabilitation are present in the novel, the renovation of the house on Quoyle’s Point is not linked to aspirational narratives of consumption, class and
taste. Instead, personal and social trauma is exposed through the process, and the uncanny resonances of the space outweigh the comforting transformative appeal. Sara Wasson, in discussing the flexibility of the Gothic as a literary mode, argues that

the Gothic often hinges on representing the experience of space as claustrophobic and imprisoning. Within these hideously constraining environment, Gothic texts depict threats from the past re-emerging (2013, 132).

*The Shipping News* positions acts of renovation in the constraints and distortions of trauma, grief and the unstable terrain of personal and family histories. Renovation in this novel, rather than being a site of positive transformation and healing as demonstrated in home improvement culture, is a Gothic process that complicates and endangers Quoyle’s attempts at recovery and self-renewal.

**“Canted doors on loose hinges”: Gothic Space and House Renovation**

After the deaths of both his parents and the wife who has caused him “six kinked years of suffering” (Proulx 1993, 140), Quoyle moves to Newfoundland with his aunt and two young daughters and takes up residence in an abandoned, isolated house that has belonged to his family for hundreds of years. We see in this novel the revision of many of what Reynolds (2013, 91) describes as ‘the repertoire of spatial tropes…that became essential to Gothic fiction: subterranean vaults, twisted passageways, trapdoors, secrete compartments and moonlit galleries.’ This is not a grand manor or Romantic castle fallen into disrepair, but it is certainly decrepit. The house is a massive, dilapidated structure bound with iron cables to the harsh landscape in which it sits, haunted by the memories of terrible acts committed there. Fred Botting tells us that as Gothic fiction developed into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the archetypal Gothic castle ‘gradually gave way to the old house: as both building and family line, it became the site where fears and anxieties returned in the present’ (1996 3). The house of the Quoyles is frequently presented in uncannily human terms of physical captivity and is a particularly *voiced* element of unrest in the text:

Dragged by human labour across miles of ice, the outcasts straining against the ropes and shouting curses...Winched onto the rock. Groaning. A bound prisoner straining to get free. The humming of the taut cables. That vibration passed into the house, made it seem alive...Swallowed by the shouting past. (Proulx 1993, 277)
This history of physical dislocation, in which the house has been dragged to its current place by the savage Quoyles is a story that continually reinserts itself into the novel through a number of voices, a unhomely narrative repetition that creates a sense of temporal dislocation, dragging the house, like Quoyle’s savage ancestors dragged it, back into the past and away from any future in which it might become a completed, renovated domestic space in which Quoyle can enact his self-renovation.

The protagonist is introduced in Proulx’s characteristically imagistic style as having a “great damp loaf of a body…eyes the colour of plastic” (1993, 2), a lonely man who is even “a failure at loneliness, yearned to be gregarious” (ibid, 4). Introducing her protagonist via images of imperfection constructs a clear analogue in the novel between self and home improvement. However, we can also note that “hive-spangled” Quoyle with his misshapen body and “freakish” chin (ibid, 2) is a collection of monstrous traits himself. Here we see another of the novel’s gestures towards the dark and uncanny repetitions of family history: Quoyle may be freakish, but as the Gothic mystery unfolds, we come to see that it’s Quoyle’s father who is truly monstrous. Represented at the beginning of the novel as a cruel, uncaring man who openly preferred Quoyle’s older brother, the father, Guy, is later revealed to have perpetrated years of abuse on his sister, Quoyle’s aunt Agnis. The novel is in many ways concerned with how bleak and traumatic episodes in family history echo through years, and this is always brought back to the house.

One of the green house’s major functions in the text is as a site of extreme temporal distortion: traumatic experiences from across many, many generations of Quoyles all seem to echo through the house in the present, registered at many times as a place “swallowed by the shouting past” (1993, 277). Frequent references to Quoyle’s almost-mythic ancestors, consistently depicted as “wild and inbred, half-wits and murderers” (ibid, 172) reinforces their dark presence analogously in the house and in Quoyle himself. There are a number of moments in which Quoyle and his daughters unwittingly evoke the ancient Quoyles and are pronounced “a real Quoyle” (1993, 185) by onlookers. These echoes of the past are deeply disturbing for Quoyle, whose connection to his violent ancestors was entirely unknown until he relocated to the green house. The shock Quoyle experiences as he discovers the truth about his family throughout the novel is yet another Gothic resonance set in motion by the renovation plot. Wasson argues that
the uncanny can also be defined as a crisis of narrative: being part of a story that you
did not (consciously) choose, a story controlled by an unknown agency that may well
be malevolent and at the very least is disturbingly opaque (in Wasson 2013, 133).

The house is both the location and container of this complex, traumatic family story, which
Quoyle slowly unravels throughout the novel. The connection to these men and women
embeds him in Newfoundland’s culture while profoundly complicating his view of himself
as an ineffectual and largely helpless individual with no real subjective power, illustrating
Freud’s argument that the uncanny returns us to something familiar but long forgotten
(1976, 620). The symbol of “the stony lives of dead generations” (Proulx 1993, 49) is the
green house which they are said to have dragged across the ice; however, in its temporally
versatile structure the house also symbolizes horrific acts of incest and sexual violence from
much closer relatives, particularly the rape of Quoyle’s aunt by his father. The overlap of
distant and recent trauma suggests that these destructive acts are familiar, unavoidable
patterns built into the house and the family line, impossible to erase by rebuilding or
reconstructing the space, which confirms Brewster’s argument that “we can renovate an
interior but never remove ghosts, creaks, layers of alteration, accretions of the past or of
previous occupancy” (2006, 143).

It is Quoyle’s aunt Agnis who sets the renovation plot in motion. Like Quoyle, she
has suffered the loss of a partner, Irene, but her compulsion to return Newfoundland and
repair the old family house involves other motivations that are less overt to the other
characters. As discussed, Agnis seeks to resolve her traumatic childhood rape. As soon as
the house is structurally sound enough for her to spend the night alone in it she embarks on
this project, another of the novel’s gestures towards flawed attempts at self-renewal through
renovation:

Her house now. Water boiled magnificently in the teakettle. Upstairs. Yet, climbing
the stairs, entering that room, was as if she ventured into a rough landscape pocked
with sinks and karst holes, abysses invisible until she pitched headlong. (Proulx 1993,
106)

We see in this passage the recurrence of the inerasable past in the house as all structural and
temporal order dissolves, and instead of the “magnificence” of domestic control associated
with the renovation, Agnis finds herself in a terrain represented in the overtly unstructured
terms of the external world, transposing Proulx’s sea imagery onto the interior space so that
it becomes a natural landscape filled with traps and terrors. This also echoes Quoyle’s first impression of the house as both eternal and utterly isolated: “it was like pulling on the edge of the world” (ibid, 44). In this house a consciousness of the destructive, unstructured or deconstructed is always at the fringe of the characters’ experience, where the subtle terror of Gothic space unsettles their attempts to renew or resolve their problems. The temporal distortion embedded in the green house is always linked to renovation and the recurring intrusions of repressed or traumatic memories speaks to Brewster’s argument that ‘we might read the house in terms of both aftermath and of the sudden, surprising arrival: with its haunting or spectral logic the house can transmit its ‘before’ into a future’ (2006, 142).

After this episode in the novel, Agnis exacts a symbolic revenge against Guy. She takes the urn full of his ashes empties its contents in the outhouse pit. This highly-charged moment is reproduced via images that replace the moving world with static objects: ‘Carried it down and through and out. A bright day. The sea glazed, ornamented with gulls. Her shadow streamed away from her’ (1993, 106). The concentration of imagery in these clipped sentences highlights the tension of the scene but also defamiliarises and distorts images of the natural world – living gulls are refigured as ornaments and the natural movement of Agnis’s shadow and the ocean are warped. Proulx’s language reflects the imagistic, sometimes photographic quality of the warped, distorted memories embedded in the fragmentary images Agnis retains of the house. In photographs ‘time conceptually stands still, as memories and revisualisations clash through time and space’ (Piatti-Farnell 2017, 247). Alone in the house for the first time since her childhood trauma forty years prior, Agnis is outside the movement of time, in a place where past and present are ruptured or fragmented. Her trauma resurfaces again and again throughout the novel, a part of Proulx’s complex reweaving of imagistic and folklorist narratives, but her symbolic act of dumping her brother’s ashes in the outhouse pit is never spoken of.

Renovation of the green house is also revealed to be an exhausting psychological process. Several weeks after Quoyle and his daughters join Agnis at the house, Quoyle notices that “her interest in fixing up slowed, veered into something private in her own room where she lay on the bed staring at the ceiling” (Proulx 1993, 197). She slips into a state of reverie, and the narrative voice gives us no resolution for the shift in Agnis’s previously ironclad commitment to renovating the house. Agnis’s disinterest could be read as one of the many instances in which the unhomely sensations produced by the renovation invoke a resurgence of the buried past. Her return to the place which housed her childhood trauma
overpowers her attempts at self-improvement and renewal. Eerily, the house seems to resist those who attempt to alter it. Quoyle, arriving at the house after a night in town, finds that “no matter what they did to the house…it kept its gaunt look, never altered from that first looming vision behind the scrim of fog” (ibid, 197). The traumatic memories of the past seem to prevent its rejuvenation, despite the attempts of its inhabitants to eradicate the lingering echoes of past violence.

The house can be read as the symbol for and container of memories of the savage, near-mythic Quoyle ancestors, who were first outcast by the small island community of Gaze Island and, when leaving, took their house with them. This story of the Quoyles dragging their house to its current position echoes uncannily through *The Shipping News*; Quoyle encounters it and his ancestors in a variety of unexpected and unsettling forms. In the novel’s final quarter we witness the human form of the dark family legacy in Nolan, the last of the savage Quoyles and a distant cousin of Proulx’s protagonist. Botting (1996, 3) tells us that in many seminal Gothic novels ‘the pleasures of horror and terror came from the reappearance of figures long gone.’ The old man is a reeking, insane figure whose skeletal white dog finally solves for Quoyle the mystery of his daughter Bunny’s terrors of a white dog menacing her. Bunny, it seems, has the clearest vision of all: she knew long before her father or aunt that some vestige of the old Quoyles was lurking near the house. Nolan’s peripheral, haunting presence throughout the renovation is yet another unhomely echo of the past. As Quoyle integrates into the community surrounding him and develops relationships with the people of Killick-Claw, his encounter with Nolan serves as an echo of the past and in some ways confirms the stories he has been so frequently told about his malicious ancestors. Quoyle finds himself again confronted by “the pressure of the past filling the space like odourless gas” (Proulx 1993, 277) and is confused by his attempts to make sense of the community that surrounds him.

“Rare geometry”: The House of the Quoyles

The novel’s most unhomely figure is the house itself, which the third person narrative voice presents to us battered by the dangerous Newfoundland coastline as well as subtler, more invasive forms of tempest. Sara Wasson tells us that ‘Gothic sites are regularly threatened by a return of old horror or atavistic decline’ (2013, 132) and the house appears as an overtly Gothic space that contains traces of many traumatic events in the current, recent and long-
past lives of the Quoyles who have always inhabited it. In acquiescing to his aunt’s insistence at the beginning of the novel that they renovate and live in the house, Quoyle unwittingly becomes the recipient of the dark inheritance of the green house and the many violent acts that have been committed there.

Proulx’s images of the vacant house, wild and treacherous weather and seas of Newfoundland and local histories of horrific acts committed by both ancient Quoyles and their contemporary counterparts are undeniably Gothic. She deploys vivid imagery and metaphor to evoke the place’s harsh, unforgiving nature, describing landscapes where “birds still flew from them like signal flares, razored the air with their cries” (1993, 49) and decaying or empty interiors where “wallpaper poured backwards off the walls” (ibid, 46). The stark, muscular similes and metaphors consistently produce the unhomely clashes of familiar and unfamiliar, reinforcing the novel’s interest in reproducing haunting echoes of “the shouting past” (ibid, 250) that persist despite the renovation efforts, so the house is indelibly inscribed with memories of trauma.

In deploying such highly stylized language, the narrative voice of Proulx’s novel is disruptive, unsettled and the striking unconventionality of syntax continually displaces the reader from any kind of comfortable immersion in the novel’s narrative momentum. Polack (2006, 105) argues that “at a stylistic level, the novel employs linguistic and poetic formations which are in consonance with the uncanny…Clipped, fragmented sentences, for instance, dislodge linear time.” The prose style regularly disrupts syntactical conventions, adopts constructions that mirror the Newfoundland dialect, and uses densely patterned paragraphs of imagery that remodel the narrative voice in a more poetic style.

Proulx frequently returns to images of the sea, whose shifting, latent power and the potential for destruction and death in its unpredictable tides becomes a motif that recurs again and again as a symbol of the fragility of life in Newfoundland. The morbidity of similes like “The bay crawled with whitecaps like maggots seething in a broad wound” (1993, 210) heightens the Gothic tensions in the novel. At significant turning points the sea and architecture are combined in metaphor to reinforce the tension of possibility symbolised by “The long horizon, the lunging, clotted sea like a swinging door opening, closing, opening” (ibid, 169). In a novel that heavily features building and renovation projects, Proulx’s prose reasserts the instability of built structures by likening them to the changeable and often life-threatening weather of coastal Newfoundland. In The Shipping News two major cultural markers of stability, language and houses, are sites of continual disruption.
and uncertainty. Proulx’s imagery is one of the novel’s fundamental techniques for revealing the pressure of uncanny forces on Quoyle and his family. Freud (1976, 640) tells us that the uncanny “as it is depicted in literature...is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life”, and this proves true of the strangely aggressive agency the narrative voice gives to the green house.

In this novel, such Gothic themes as “incarceration, abduction and psycho-terror” (Wagner 2013, 115) are embodied by the house as much as by its current and past inhabitants. The house is certainly the novel’s most obvious prisoner, bound to the rock and seemingly constant in its straining towards escape. This sense of uncannily humanlike agency is reinforced – rather, it is *voiced* – by the house on many occasions: when the Quoyle family first enter, “the house threw their voices back at them, hollow and unfamiliar” (ibid, 44); nails “came out crying” (ibid, 45); repeated references to the huge iron cables that strap the house to the stark, isolated rock which, the aunt says “make a noise you don’t forget” (ibid, 44).

The house, it seems, speaks in its own language of trauma both inflicted on it and within in. The novel is concerned with how bleak and traumatic episodes in family history echo through years, and this is always brought back to the house. It’s not until the family arrives at the house that Quoyle’s fears about his daughter Bunny begin to clarify. A superstitious, obsessive and occasionally violent six-year-old, Bunny’s strangely persistent anxieties and night terrors are sources of great concern for Quoyle, who begins to worry that his child has inherited the murderous traits of the ‘savage pack’ (Proulx 1993, 148) of ancient Quoyles. Tempestuous as she is, Bunny is the one of the novel’s most virtuous figures and an enthusiastic renovator, a trait which the community of builders and repairers in Killick-Claw seem to collectively recognise and reward: Bunny receives a gift of a hammer from Dennis Buggit, and a carpenter’s square from Skipper Alfred, who refers to her as “the carpenter maid” whom he has brought a gift in order to give the child “a bit of encouragement” (ibid, 149). Throughout the novel Bunny is also shown helping her father with renovation activities – where Quoyle’s self-description in his comically dismal newspaper-headline style is “Man Lukewarm on Ancestral Home Way Out on Point” (ibid, 97), Bunny seems constantly to be involved in the process, and it is only during these activities that the narrative voice describes her tenderly as “the intent, the helpful child” (ibid, 108).
Bunny’s relationship with the house engenders an overt psychological and physical response: her first impression on seeing the house is “that colour of green made her sick” (ibid, 43); and she is the one who, in her role as helpful child, attempts to climb the house’s “wild pitch” roof (ibid, 113) to assist her father in repairing the shingle roof. Reaching the very top of the ladder on the roof of the forbiddingly tall house, Bunny is moments away from stepping off onto “the evil slope on the wrong side of everything” (ibid) when Quoyle grabs her before she falls “shrieking to the rock” (ibid). Here the house’s implied aggression against acts of renovation is registered in the word ‘evil’; Proulx describes the structure using a distinctively human and morally prescriptive adjective, enhancing our sense of the house’s sometimes malicious, sometimes melancholic agency.

Nicole Reynolds (2013, 89) notes that many Gothic spaces involved ‘distortion of scale and perspective within and around architectural space’. In many instances in the novel the house’s dimensions shift. Its unreliability as a stable, grounded space is made instantly clear by its most striking architectural addition: it is strapped to the rock on which it sits by enormous wire cables that prevent the house from being blown away. The narrative voice returns again and again to the cables throughout the novel; their eerie singing or wailing is one of the consistently Gothic architectural elements of the house, and though it is bound to the rock in one way, in many others it transforms and blurs the boundaries between past and present, self and other, and interior and exterior. This, however, is resolved in the novel’s climatic dream-sequence, in which the house is torn from the rock by violent weather. The attempts at home-making and of resolution of trauma through renovation are proved to be insufficient: in order for the family to fully settle in Newfoundland and excise the unhomely presences of recent and long-held terrors, the house must disappear.

*The Shipping News* ends with an enormous storm in which the house is ripped from the rock it’s been strapped to for centuries. The text completely eviscerates the house and the enormous renovation work that went into it. This large-scale removal of the house moves the haunting narrative past from presence into absence: the house, with its echoes of trauma and violence, is swept away, rather than fixed, gesturing towards the insurmountable nature of the memories emplaced there.

Significantly, the passage in which the green disappears is delivered as part of a bad dream that Bunny experiences while the family sleeps in their town-house, barred from the green house by wild weather. In the dream, “Bunny went up the howling chimney, sailed against the wind and across the bay to where … the house slewed on grating sills. The cables
shrilled.” (336) Bunny is the house’s uncanny double in this scene – she witnesses the house being torn away while she “watched, flat on her back, arms outstretched like a staked prisoner and unable to move” (ibid). She takes its place in this scene – straining, strapped to the rock – as it is obliterated by the storm. Though Bunny instantly forgets the dream, in the morning her father finds that their house is indeed gone, and given that elements of the supernatural frequently occur in Gothic spaces and narratives (Halim 1), the fact that the child’s dream comes true reinforces the interpretation of the house as a Gothic space.

“Straight lines and straight cuts”: A Community of Renovators

Uncanny connections are everywhere in The Shipping News. Polack (2006, 101) sees the deep connection between the Newfoundlander and the island as “an uncanny bond between people and nature [that] has been formed to the extent that, for example, Jack Buggit “just knows” when someone is drowning.” Bunny also seems to have been born with a similar bond, a trait that marks her as a true Newfoundland Quoyle, carrying on the half-mythic legacy of Quoyle’s savage forebears. While she and her younger sister Sunshine are often depicted as bratty children, once the family has relocated to Newfoundland we begin to see Bunny’s wildness and roughness as echoing her violent ancestors. This is emphasised by her near-supernatural sensitivity to omens and signs, in particular the recurring figure of a spectral white dog. The white dog appears to Bunny in a number of seemingly quotidian spaces and objects – the white wake from her father’s boat, decorations in a friend’s front yard, a small stone that she believes takes the shape of a dog and which she says “wants to bite me and make my blood drip out” (1993, 160). It is later revealed that the dog belongs to her relative Nolan and the connection symbolizes Bunny’s instinctive and uncanny connection to the house and the landscape in which it sits. The things she fears most – the house, the white dog – are both strongly associated with the violence and terror of the Quoyle ancestors, and it is not until the narrative resolves the house’s position that Bunny’s fears can be resolved and she can integrate into the community.

The majority of characters who populate The Shipping News assist Quoyle in various ways on one of his two renovation projects: the overt house renovation, or the implicit personal renovation involved in his experience of adjusting to life in Newfoundland and resolving his grief over the death of his wife. They are all in some way involved with acts of building, construction, repair or dwelling: his aunt opens a shop repairing boat upholstery,
offering cosmetic repairs to the interior, domestic spaces of a community whose entire livelihood is engaged by the ability to live or on with the ocean; his closest friend Dennis Buggit is a carpenter whom Quoyle becomes acquainted with after hiring Dennis to help on the renovation of his house; even Billy Pretty, the figure of Newfoundlander wisdom and folklore in the novel, assumes the role of caretaker of a haunting, abandoned township on Gaze Island, where he grew up and to which he returns each year to care for and repair the graves of his family. Polack (2006, 101) argues that in *The Shipping News* “history is an important…prompt of abject and uncanny circumstances” and Quoyle, travelling with Billy on one such journey, thinks of Gaze Island as “a secret and ruined place. Desolate, and the slyness of the tickle gave the sense of a lair” (Proulx 1993, 174).

Danel Olson, in his discussion of Jennifer Egan’s *The Keep*, tells us that like many Gothic novels “it positions its tattered characters in an antiquated and decaying place, dwelling on those secrets and violations from the past that curse or limit characters now, physically and psychologically” (2010, 12) In *The Shipping News*, a predecessor to *The Keep*’s complex reimagining of Gothic renovation tropes, almost all characters bear the trace of a personal mystery or tragedy, and this is always rendered legible to the reader in the built structures to which they are attached. Quoyle’s colleague Nutbeem built and lived on the boat that left him shipwrecked in Newfoundland, and throughout the novel undertakes repairs to his “homely little boat” (ibid, 271) *Borogove*, which is subsequently destroyed and sunk by revelers at Nutbeem’s own farewell party. In this novel, such failures of renewal in construction or restoration projects occur frequently, prefiguring the final, cinematic evisceration of the green house.

The landscape’s destructive nature is foregrounded in one of the first stories about Newfoundland that Quoyle is told on his way there, in which a fisherman converts his fishing boat into a homely domestic space, the boat “hauling up on the shore far enough out of the storm and he fixed it up. Little chimney sticking up, path with a border of stone” (ibid, 37). The brief tale establishes themes of resilience, ingenuity and craftsmanship, as the fisherman transforms his boat into a house and lives there in comfort - until, one day, “the rotten hull collapsed and killed him” (ibid, 37). This short narrative performs the function of introducing the pattern of unreliable built spaces which form one of the major Gothic elements in the novel. As *The Shipping News* progresses, we grow less and less certain of the comforting strength of built places, and are continually reminded that both internal and
external forces are capable of breaking apart the physical and psychological structures of home, as Quoyle’s renovation project makes clear.

*The Shipping News* is full of a destructive energy which sees the majority of the novel’s physical structures endure some form of ferocious, potentially obliterating barrage. The possibility of destruction is everywhere: imagery of the weather and rocks of Newfoundland situate the action in a deeply turbulent but beautiful landscape; Quoyle hears or reads numerous stories about boats wrecked in storms; he himself capsizes his own boat and nearly drowns. The more sinister representation of the disintegration of physical structures comes with the arrival of the Melvilles, a drunken, aristocratic couple who arrive in Killick-Claw on the boat they live on, a profoundly disturbing domestic space that was custom built for Hitler.

**“Every nut and bolt is loose”: Conclusions**

In the second half of the novel Proulx introduces another building project, antithetical to the renovation of the green house: the construction of a boat for Quoyle. Instead of symbolising a struggle with the emplaced trauma of the past, as the house does, the boat Quoyle commissions Alvin Yark to build signifies an adaptation to the waterbound domestic spaces of Newfoundland. However, as Helene Cixous tells us, the uncanny “never completely disappears” (1976, 548), and often “presents itself only on the fringe of something else” (ibid, 528). So it is in the workshop of Alvin Yark, where Quoyle participates in the seemingly homely, life-affirming work of building a boat that will allow him safe access to the water that is inscribed as the community’s major cultural and communal life source.

Yark sings while he works, the same few lines repeated over and over, from a song that tells of the sinking of a boat called the *Gandy Goose*:

> “Oh the *Gandy Goose*, it ain’t no use,  
> ’cause every nut and bolt is loose,  
> She’ll go to the bottom just like the *Bruce*...” (Proulx 1993, 330)

Here the unhomely makes its return: the unending song Yark sings as he builds reinforces the text’s concentrated imagery of the fallibility of built structures. It presupposes the sinking of the *Gandy Goose* based on the sinking of the *Bruce*, reinforcing the pattern of eventual collapse introduced by the brief story at the beginning of the novel in which the
fisherman is killed by his boat-turned-home. Even as Yark, the master boat builder, finishes Quoyle’s new boat, an image of idealised personal and social stability which “fits together like a handclasp” (ibid, 281), this sense of completion and structural soundness is then subtly undermined by the return of Yark’s endless, circular song and its narrative of inevitable collapse.

In the community of The Shipping News acts of renovation are built into the structure of everyday life. These activities are presented as so commonplace that they achieve a sense of intimacy and domesticity that can be read as existing in the same socio-cultural mode as acts of cooking, cleaning or gardening, which we see in soothing homeliness of Quoyle’s collaboration with Yark on his new boat. Quoyle achieves through this building a level of dwelling, an ability to be at-home. But, as the novel is always already reminding us, we can’t know whether the boat will last, and the song serves as both a warning and a threat.

The haunting circularity is reinforced by Quoyle and Agnis’s conversation after the house is blown away by a wild storm: after the episode of its evisceration we see the increasingly self-confident Quoyle and even his pragmatic aunt experience “the collapse of the subject’s present under the weight of the abandoned past” (Polack 2006, 97). Despite engaging in a conversation about their new, far more practical and homely living circumstances in town, both characters experience a need to confirm with each other the eventual reconstruction of the green house. Whether it will happen at all is again not clear, but for a moment, in their conversation, we see the house restored once again, to its position on the rock, this time in the form of an idealized “summer house”, a structure which both reader and characters know is ultimately incompatible with Newfoundland’s wild weather patterns as well as the more dangerous, more destructive patterns of trauma and violence embedded in the image of the house on Quoyle’s Point.

The textual analysis of this novel reveals the Gothic elements embedded in and motivated by the renovation project at the centre of this novel. Proulx’s narrative strategies consciously remodel traditional linguistic structures at a sentence level to present the fragmented, temporally, physically and psychologically turbulent site of the Gothic house in vibrantly imagistic, savage language. In contemporary culture acts of home improvement are frequently associated with narratives of redemption, self-improvement and middle-class aspiration, however this case study of an acclaimed literary novel has shown that under the surface of home improvement is a deep unhomeliness which resurfaces again and again. Freud and Cixous (1976, 545) both tell us that it is impossible to banish the unheimlich
forever: its return, as Yark’s song signifies, is inevitable and following the evisceration of the house Quoyle and his aunt’s conversation seems to hint at this pattern of endless repetition, a helpless insistence on dragging themselves back to the houses of the past.
Works Cited


Piatti-Farnell, Lorna. 2017. “‘For god’s sake, cover yourself.’: sexual violence, disrupted histories, and the gendered politics of patriotism in *Watchmen*” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8, no. 3: 238-251 DOI: 10.1080/21504857.2017.1307869


