

## CRISTINA FERNANDEZ CUBAS'S HAUNTED HOUSES: MENACE AND SENTIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

This article reviews fiction by Cristina Fernández Cubas which reveals an awareness of the potential of the house as a powerful presence in a narrative, rendering the arrangement of architectural settings to cultivate fear. The main aim is to credit Fernández Cubas as one of the first Spanish authors to approach the conception of the sentient house or *evil place*.<sup>1</sup> As such, it exclusively focuses on the aspect of sentience in horror fiction, excluding all other types of hauntings such as those triggered by demonic or ghostly agency. The sentient house is one of the main contributions to horror in the last century, and has gradually earned its own exclusive niche, particularly in Anglo-American fiction. In Spain, it could be argued that historically there has been less interest in horror fiction due to various socio-political circumstances, and a lack of non-ghostly hauntings. Since the 1990s, however, Fernández Cubas has succeeded in placing implausible architectural spaces centre stage, positioning her houses in antagonistic leading roles, and endowing buildings with conspicuous traits of sentience. It will be argued that key to this change is the aspect of homelessness, and therefore the need for a home that characters in this situation experience.

A review of «Mi hermana Elba» (1980), «El ángulo del horror» (1990), «El lugar» (1994) and «La fiebre azul» (2006) illustrates how Fernández Cubas laid the foundations for the sentient house, which is becoming increasingly popular in Spanish horror fiction. Her early steps into sentience paved the way for new contemporary writers of horror in the country, participating in the trend of the bad house becoming a common character in popular fiction and film.

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1 In this study, the word *Spanish* solely refers to literature from Spain. Similarly, the word *American* is used to refer to narratives produced in the United States.

KEYWORDS: sentience; Cristina Fernández Cubas; haunted house; Shirley Jackson; homelessness.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo explora la narrativa de Cristina Fernández Cubas en la que se aprecia su conocimiento del potencial de la casa como presencia determinante, mostrando una deliberada disposición de sus escenarios arquitectónicos al servicio del miedo. El objetivo principal es el reconocimiento de Fernández Cubas como una de las primeras autoras españolas en abordar la concepción de la casa sintiente o *lugar malo*. El estudio, por tanto, se centra exclusivamente en el aspecto de la consciencia en las casas encantadas, excluyendo otras líneas de lo sobrenatural tales como agentes demoníacos o entes fantasmales. La casa sintiente es una de las principales contribuciones al terror del último siglo, un tropo que ha ido ganándose su propio nicho, particularmente en la ficción angloamericana. Tradicionalmente se ha considerado a la literatura española poco interesada en el género del terror, probablemente como resultado de diversas circunstancias sociopolíticas, siendo limitada la presencia de encantamientos no causados por terceros. Sin embargo, desde la década de 1990, Fernández Cubas ha logrado colocar espacios arquitectónicos extraños en el centro la narración, posicionando sus casas en roles antagónicos y dotando a los edificios con rasgos inequívocos de consciencia. Como aspecto clave en esta transición aparece el concepto del hogar y la carencia de un hogar sufrida por determinados personajes.

Un examen de «Mi hermana Elba» (1980), «El ángulo del horror» (1990), «El lugar» (1994) y «La fiebre azul» (2006) ilustra cómo Fernández Cubas sentó las bases de la casa mala, una figura cada vez más popular en la narrativa de terror española. Sus primeros pasos hacia la consciencia arquitectónica allanaron el camino para nuevos escritores de terror contemporáneos, propiciando que la casa maligna se convirtiera en un personaje común en la creación literaria y el cine de carácter popular.

PALABRAS CLAVE: sintiencia; Cristina Fernández Cubas; casa encantada; Shirley Jackson; sin hogar.



#### 1. THE RISE OF THE SENTIENT HOUSE IN AMERICA AND SPAIN

One of the most significant transformations in the paradigm of the haunted house is the transition from haunted building to sentient house. Inanimate houses in traditional hauntings acted as mere settings, lacking char-

acter and presence. While they would merely host evil or tormented entities, the sentient house takes on greater importance by deploying awareness or taking action directly. Sentient houses have only recently been incorporated into the pantheon of iconic horror figures,<sup>2</sup> after experiencing a transformation which is particularly noticeable in American fiction.<sup>3</sup> With a mind and a will of its own as opposed to a ghost or demonic agency, the sentient house is a frequent feature in contemporary haunted house narratives, which subordinate or even dispense completely with ghosts in favour of an awareness of the house. Stephen King employs «Bad Place» to refer to the location of a haunting, tracing its origins back to prehistory: «[P]robably all of it goes back to the caveman who had to move out of his hole in the rock because he heard what sounded like voices back there in the shadows» (King, 1993: 299). In the context of literary criticism, the term «sentient house» was first employed by Dale Bailey (1999) to refer to supernatural buildings which are intentionally dangerous or fatal to their occupants. He traced the narrative idea of sentience back to the word used by Roderick Usher in Edgar Allan Poe's (1986) celebrated story «The Fall of the House of Usher» (1839) to describe the family home (Bailey, 1999: 15).

While Poe might have worked inspirationally in how his narrator describes the anthropomorphic front of the house, sentience is not actually accomplished until the publication of Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959). For the first time, a building targets and lures its occupants to their death for no apparent reason, the house lacking what Stephen Mariconda defines as «backstory», that is, a definite history of suffering or demonology (2007: 289). The book is a milestone in horror fiction as the referent of sentience (Díez Cobo 2022a: 20), indicated by the abundance of subsequent narratives such as *The Shining* (1977) (Stephen King, 1982), *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hopper, 1982) and *The Amityville Horror* (Anson, 1978), among others. Irrespective of the inclusion (or not) of ghosts or demons, from the 1960s on, sentience remains a recurrent feature in mainstream horror fiction, cinema and now streaming platforms.<sup>4</sup>

2 Some of the consecrated popular icons of horror, which King labels the *Tarot* of horror, include the vampire, the doppelgänger, and the scientifically reanimated human creature (King, 1993: 65).

3 See Couto-Ferrera (2022: 25), Díez Cobo (2020: 139, 153; 2022a: 1; 2022b: 1196-1197) and Fernández Arellano (2013: 336) for more on Anglo-Saxon horror as the prevailing influence in Spanish haunted house fiction.

4 Couto-Ferrera argues that, after Jackson, hauntings return to Victorian aesthetic patterns, allowing only occasional voicing on the part of the house (2022: 269). However, the works listed above and recent productions such as Netflix's 2018 streaming adaptation of Jackson's book and Joe Hill's *Locke and Key* (2020) exemplify the good health of the sentient modern model.

Contrasting with the noticeable transformation in fiction in English, a parallel evolution cannot be traced in Spain.<sup>5</sup> It is only recently that Spanish writers seem to have embraced horror as a thematic field. Historically, fantastic fiction and horror have a very limited presence in the Spanish canon. This scarcity might be the consequence of socio-political factors such as the extraordinary narratives arriving from America (Castillo, 1982: 11-15) or the prominent political position of the church, which upheld a God/devil dichotomy where the devil absorbed most elements of horror and the holy those of the fantastic (Martínez Marín, 1999: 9; Llopis, 2013: 69).<sup>6</sup> With the rise of Gothic literature, the Spanish Inquisition dealt with dark themes by banning novels altogether between 1799 and 1831 (Llopis 2013: 19). In mid-twentieth century, at the precise moment Shirley Jackson's first ever evil house came into being, Spain was held back, struggling to overcome the trauma of the Spanish Civil War by promoting institutionalised discourses on homemaking, tradition and religion (Morales Rivera, 2017: 75). Alternative guided forms of entertainment such as bullfighting and football were also promoted by the government, all of which indirectly resulted in reduced Spanish production of fantastic fiction and horror (Fernández Arellano, 2013: 331; Soliño, 2002: 57; Pérez, 2004: 1).<sup>7</sup> It is only by the seventies that these controlled leisure formats lost their hold, due to some extent to tourism, foreign influences and even women's increased participation in the workforce. For the first time in centuries Spanish audiences could enjoy uncontrolled entertainment from foreign markets —mainly North America. These influences seemed to permeate the creativity of writers since a significant amount of domestic horror starts being produced. It could be argued that the eighties mark the start of horror entertainment in Spain, and also when a scission of horror and fantastic fiction takes place with emerging authors who work almost exclusively within these two genres, similar to the specialisation shown previously by writers such as Poe, Lovecraft and Stephen King in North America (Fernández Arellano, 2013: 333; Roas and Casas, 2008: 33). The change is particularly visible in film-

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5 See Pallejá (2010) for detailed analysis of the appearance of the sentient haunted house in Shirley Jackson as the result of women's exclusive sociocultural history, in both American and Spanish literature.

6 Martínez Marín names *El Cantar de Mío Cid* (circa 1200), *El Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) and the much-acclaimed *Don Quixote* (1606, 1616) as illustrative examples of the historical preference for realism (1999: 7).

7 It is interesting to bear in mind that it is at this time that Magical Realism was peaking in Latin America. Without stretching an interpretation of history, the different directions that literature written in the Spanish language took on the two continents should be at least noted, since Magical Realism specifically incorporates the fantastic into the ordinary.

making, with an escalating release of horror films widely accepted in international markets.<sup>8</sup> In narrative fiction, writers such as Javier García Sánchez, Pilar Pedraza, David Roas and Santiago Eximeno are among the contemporary authors whose interest lies in the genre, as of course is Cristina Fernández Cubas, who, as mentioned before, was one of the first to give space to the sentient house.

If Spanish horror had, up to this point, mostly disregarded the narrative potential of the house as a cognisant antagonist, Cristina Fernández Cubas drew attention to it and used it as a leading force by placing the threat in the building and disposing of additional entities or previous victims. Perhaps the key for the transition to take place at this particular time lies in a concept indirectly identified in the famous work *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert and Gubar, 2000): escaping home. As the authors state, female Gothic emerged from the experience of women imprisoned in men's houses (2000: 83), and indeed the early stages of Gothic itself dealt with narratives of women escaping the house in books such as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Anne Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). For Andrew Hock Soon Ng, the Gothic house is not a home, but a prison, where «house and home are ruptured» (2015: 13). In Fernández Cubas, however, while the elements at play are the same as that noted by these critics, a reversal takes place, since her doomed protagonists voluntarily stay in the house. Furthermore: they are aware of its abnormality, its Janus-like face,<sup>9</sup> but they share an emotional need for *home* which works critically towards their subjection and destruction. Fernández Cubas's particular understanding of home acts not only as a trademark, but connects across time and space with similar understandings of how to arouse fear based on problems relating to space.

Some similarities can therefore be traced between the societies where Cristina Fernández Cubas grew up and the personal circumstances of writers like Shirley Jackson. A writer and a journalist, Jackson wrote her novel in America at a time when the government was encouraging women to return to domestic homemaking. At this same time, the haunted house formula evolved from being merely the occupation by ghosts or demons to that of the

8 Some of the Spanish films with international impact have been directed by Jaume Balagueró (Lleida, 1968-), Juan Antonio Bayona (Barcelona, 1965-), Alejandro Amenábar (Santiago de Chile, 1972-), Norberto López Amado (1965-), or the Mexican Guillermo del Toro (Guadalajara 1964-), who often works with Spanish production and in Spanish sociohistorical settings.

9 Janus was the god of two faces in Roman myth. In relation to sentience, Janus-faced image has been used to refer to buildings which deploy uncanny ambivalence about domesticity and threat (Pallejá, 2010: 51; Ng, 2015: 2).

sentient house (Bailey, 1999: 16). In Spain, Fernández Cubas also grew up and started her career with a background of institutionalised domesticity. It seems possible that the contradictory emotions of love, need and the rejection of the idea of home would have been operative on a creative level by deploying victims whose vulnerability lies in their primeval need for home. Such is the case with Jackson's protagonist Eleanor, and also Fernández Cubas's silent little girl in «Mi hermana Elba» [My Sister Elba] (1980), the three children in «El ángulo del horror» [The Angle of Horror] (1990), the unsettled bride in «El lugar» [The Place] (1994) and the travellers in «La fiebre azul» [The Blue Fever] (2006).<sup>10</sup>

Since Fernández Cubas's early contributions of agency, sentience has experienced a surge of interest from Spanish writers, which also happened in American fiction where, once it appeared, it became increasingly frequent, irrespective of the level of gore or demonology in a work. Elia Barceló's «La Maga» (2015) echoes *Hill House*, though under a more violent spotlight scattered with children's deaths that transforms the narrator into the numb predator of further victims.<sup>11</sup> Also, the girls' residence described in Patricia Esteban Erlés's *Las madres negras* (2018) contributes to the trope by presenting a building with a voice of its own, this time dragging behind it the imprint of an unsavoury history of death, suffering and a god-like demon. By the same author, the story «Habitante» (Esteban Erlés, 2019) narrates how the spirit of a drowned previous tenant possesses a new occupant, luring her into the property through the sound of the water in the pool where the earlier incumbent had died. As a last illustration of this growing interest, in «La casa embrujada», by Fernando Iwasaki (2004), a transformation similar to that in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* occurs when a man is challenged to spend the night in an empty abandoned house.<sup>12</sup> While the work of the contemporary writers mentioned shows that sentience has been incorporated into the trope, the four stories analysed below deploy what seems to be an early intuition of the horror sentient house dating from the eighties.

10 All translations of Fernández Cubas's titles or quotes are my own unless otherwise specified.

11 *Rose Red* (Baxley, 2002), with a similar storyline to that of Barceló's, was initially designed as a new adaptation of Jackson's novel by Stephen King and Steven Spielberg. The idea was abandoned, and later turned into a mini-series, when Jan de Bont proved to be quicker at filming *The Haunting* (1999).

12 It should be noted that some contemporary stories show sentience, but they do not belong in the horror genre. For example, in the house of *Casa en venta*, by Mercedes Abad (2020), the house acts as a mere narrator of the story of its occupants. While the house does have the voice that other literary houses lacked, such as in Mercè Rodoreda's *Mirall trencat* (1990), which was originally published in 1974, or even Disney's *Encanto* (Bush and Howard, 2021), the narrative fails to fit into the genre of horror.

## 2. DANGEROUS BUILDINGS IN CRISTINA FERNÁNDEZ CUBAS'S SHORT FICTION

Fernández Cubas's oeuvre mostly comprises fantastic fiction and horror. In the latter, she explores the possibilities of spatial fantastic and horror modes, denoting an understanding of houses that she exploits as a tool for fear by deploying paranormal architectural spaces, which she gives starring and destructive roles. In her scheme, the particular vulnerability of their victims is their homelessness.

Without this, it is arguable that the house would suffice to carry the narrative weight without extra violence or a backstory. Perhaps the stories exemplify a moment of transition in Spanish horror where contradictory feelings of love and rejection towards the home were being openly addressed and contemplated.

Born in Barcelona in 1945, Fernández Cubas grew up in the society where homemaking and domesticity were institutionally promoted. Although Fernández Cubas studied law, she worked as a journalist and, after 1980, as a writer. Her work has been translated into ten languages and is studied in several universities as part of the literature syllabus (Glenn and Pérez, 2005: 11).

The narratives considered here are arranged in chronological order: The stories follow a natural progression beginning with harmful architecture in «Mi hermana Elba» and culminating in «La fiebre azul», where a hotel distils the vulnerabilities of the occupants. The evolution of Fernández Cubas's work demonstrates the increasingly destructive power of houses, which evolve from being a magical, seemingly neutral, space into an indecipherable spirituality that creeps into the occupants.<sup>13</sup> As Claire C. Marcus identified after twenty years of study, behind the idea of «home» are always profound human feelings associated with the intimate spheres of the person (1995: 4). It is on this intimate need that the buildings in these stories operate. This remains a distinctive trait in her later work in contrast to other contemporary Spanish fiction.<sup>14</sup>

13 Since the aim of this study is to consider early traits of sentience in hauntings, the scope of stories has been narrowed down to the four mentioned. However, homelessness and claustrophobia are relevant in other horror stories including: «Hablar con viejas» (2016b: 45), where young girl who is kidnapped while looking for a place to move out; her completion of Poe's unfinished story «El faro» (1997: 29) which describes a nightmarish mechanical lighthouse which forever imprisons its keepers; «La habitación de Nona» (2016a: 13) which depicts a claustrophobic room full of imaginary boundaries which a psychologically unstable girl refuses to leave. Special mentioning should be made of «La nueva vida» (2016c: 119), where a hotel can transitorily take the narrator back in time to her youth and to her beloved. While pathos is intense as it ends, it cannot be considered a menace. It is also a tribute to Richard Matheson's almost identical plot in the novel *Bid Time Return* (1975) and its film adaptation *Somewhere in Time* (1980).

14 For the purposes of a study of contemporary narratives, the anthology edited by Rosa María Díez Cobo (2022a) comprises stories written in Spanish where buildings show signs of sentience. It should be

The first of Fernández Cubas's stories exemplifying the destructive side of buildings is «Mi hermana Elba». It tells the story of two sisters who are sent to a Catholic boarding school following their parents' separation in the 1950s: the eleven-year-old narrator and the seven-year-old Elba. Elba suffers from a mild disorder that makes her rather solitary and interferes with her speech, which is why at school she is kept near her older sister. After a period of lonely adaptation, the narrator meets Fátima, an independent older girl who introduces her to the existence of spots of invisibility in the building. Fátima also explains that Elba is the person who is most aware of the spots and knows how to transport herself between them. The three girls become friends and spend the following year exploring the mysteries of the architectural hideaways. Elba's intuitive abilities peak once home during the holidays, where she manipulates space and stops time by looking at clocks. However, after the holidays everything changes: Elba is taken to an institution that will attend to her special needs, and Fátima has grown into a young woman who no longer cares about magic. In her loneliness at school, the narrator constantly feels the eerie telepathic communication of Elba crying out for help from afar, but pleads with her to leave her alone. As time passes, the narrator loses interest in her sister and in alterations of space, though Elba does not. During the next holidays at home, the narrator avoids Elba, who is increasingly absorbed in exploring the mysteries of her home: «She would walk around the house with her eyes exaggeratedly open, stroking the padding of the armchairs» (1988: 79). The story ends when Elba is found dead, having jumped off a balcony.

This story is the first to present extraordinary buildings as central to the plot. The spaces Elba inhabits, both at the boarding school and, afterwards, her home, are incomprehensible, unsettling, and ultimately fatal. In Elba's wordless but unique experiences over time and space, she seems to be clinging to the semiotic, in accordance with Julia Kristeva's paradigm whereby the semiotic constitutes a fluid, continuous reality before the child enters the symbolic world of language (Kristeva, 1980: 136; 1984: 24). Elizabeth Grosz relates Kristeva's semiotic to spatial concerns by stressing that «the semiotic marks out the space or locus the subject-to-be will occupy as a subject [...defying] distinctive boundaries (...), binary oppositional structures and hierarchical

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noted that the hauntings do not always revolve around horror, considering as well other genres. The genre of the fantastic includes a happy nomadic house in «La casa feliz», by Jose María Merino (in Díez Cobo, 2022a: 85). Similarly, «Un flamante apartamento» seems to have elements of science fiction as the house is gradually sectioned into pieces by an unknown high-precision procedure and transported to another dimension inhabited by strange entities (in Díez Cobo, 2022a: 33).



forms of organisation» (Grosz, 1989: 43). Indeed, the fluidity that Elba irradiates over time and her spatial surroundings challenges boundaries and dictates. Similarly, Fegley (1998: 325) sees in Elba's silence a refusal to enter the symbolic order where a clock would be an exponent, given that it is an instrument created by society to arbitrarily structure time. Elba feels safe hiding in «secret, unseen space[s] within the physical space» (Folkhart, 2019: 221). If Elba's unique yet incomprehensible relationship with space and time can be read as derived from her lingering in non-binary oppositional structures, it is this choice that kills her, for this is the place where the building targets and entraps her. While it is true that Elba appears to find consolation in what Patricia García García has labelled «sanctuary spaces» (2022: 146), her helplessness in escaping what are actually architectural prisons and making the transition to the outer world of maturity is what ultimately destroys her, significantly by jumping from the very house that she had been fascinated with. Following a pattern frequent in narratives of hauntings where sentient buildings emotionally connect with targeted characters, Elba succumbs to her own intimate connection with the house and increasing dependence on it.<sup>15</sup>

«Mi hermana Elba», therefore, shares some of the traits of the haunted house formula. It echoes darker stories of supernatural houses that absorb and destroy their victims, a significant step in the Spanish evolution towards the antagonisation of houses as early as 1980. Not only does this story solely revolve around paranormal architecture, independent of human ghosts or demonic forces, it is also the first in a series where emotional dependence on architecture proves fatal. Despite the building not being presented as a wilful menace, the spatial alteration does target a particularly vulnerable character, tantalizing her with soothing hideaways in her new loneliness, and ultimately destroying her. In this way, Elba echoes Shirley Jackson's Eleanor, whose exclusive understanding of the house places her in the position of victim. Elba's story finishes like Eleanor's: with the girl lying lifeless as a sacrificial offering at the feet of the house.

A second story demonstrating the negative side to the construct of *home* is «El ángulo del horror» (1990) which in this case revolves around the growing awareness of the hidden and harmful sides of a house. The narrator, Julia, another young girl, tells of her concern for her older brother Carlos, who has just returned from a stay in Britain. Since his return Carlos has been behaving strangely, not wanting to eat and spending all day lying in a

<sup>15</sup> For a study of the hideaways as holes in fantastic spaces, see Patricia García García (2015).

dark attic room. Julia observes that Carlos occasionally leaves this room to walk to the front gate, look up at the house in dismay, and then gloomily return to his bedroom.<sup>16</sup>

After keeping watch for some time, she eventually manages to speak to Carlos. The two had grown particularly close because they both experienced lucid dreams, and they suspect that their younger sister might share the same capability.<sup>17</sup> Carlos had never thought much of this skill, but he tells Julia that while in England he had had a vivid dream where he was returning home, only to find the house inexplicably horrifying: «[T]here was something very strange in it. Something terribly unpleasant and distressing that at first I could not identify. Because it was precisely *this house*, except that, due to some strange gift or punishment, I was viewing it from a bizarre angle of vision» (Fernández Cubas, 1990: 109). He then describes the profound effect this vision had on him: «A strange angle that is no less real for the horror it produces in me» (1990: 109).

Julia experiences a small shock of denial learning how her brother feels about their home. At one particular moment, Julia can for an instant physically feel his anxiety when she momentarily finds the room asphyxiating (1990: 110). Afterwards, refuses questioning Carlos further, becoming instead his ally in trying to distract the family. When Julia warns Carlos that he is to be sent to an institution, Carlos kills himself with sleeping pills. It is then, beside the body of her dead brother, that Carlos's *gift* shifts into Julia, who begins to see her house and her parents from the same angle of horror that he had spoken of. In her eyes, her father now appears to be a grotesque clown, his facial features suddenly resembling a skull covered with painted wax. Similarly, the formerly warm touch of her mother now feels slimy and creepy, making Julia shudder in disgust: the lifting of the veil from Julia's eyes now reveals the dreadful hidden side of her own family home.

In «El ángulo del horror» creating a distance from what is familiar plays an important part towards interpretation, since it is Carlos's time in England, that presents him with just such an alternative view of his home. Trying to understand Carlos and displacing herself from her position of familiar comfort, Julia also learns to see the inherent but complementary negative side of home. The sensation of claustrophobia is intensified by the young age

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16 Peripheral areas and their significance are highlighted by Patricia García García (2020: 5). The house and its surroundings must include these spaces as areas of influence. The swimming pool in «Habitante» and the threshold in «Mi hermana Elba» should be understood as an extension of the house.

17 In a lucid dream, the dreamer is aware that s/he is sleeping though is often in control. For further information, see the studies on sleeping disorders by LaBerge, Levitan and Dement (1986).

of the protagonists, and the curse that looms over their younger sister. The situation is practically inescapable for the siblings because they must remain in the house until they become self-sufficient, more pronounced for the younger Julia. The narrative suggests that, when Julia also perishes from a devastating awareness of the horrors of her home, the curse will move to yet another host, their currently unaware younger sister.

The geographical distance also invites a political reading, whereby the house can be equated with generational change, which in the context of 1980s Catalonia pointed to the generational differences. In such a reading, the children are capable of viewing the family home/old order through different eyes. Carlos's visionary transformation is foretold via the lucid dreams that the siblings share. His vision is irremediably altered by the shift of time/space, through the not only oneiric but also geographical displacement from the daily reality he knows (Folkart, 2002: 210). He acquires a critical vision of his house/nation, and questions presumed sources of comfort and truths. Returning home is far from reassuring. Instead, familiar figures reveal themselves to be disturbing mockeries of the protection they once represented, symbolised by the father's grotesque appearance and the mother's unsettling touch. It is possible that these allusions might refer to the government during Francisco Franco's rule, or even during the years of the Transition to democracy, —a time experienced by the author—, dominated by a pact of silence regarding the Civil War and much of the subsequent order.<sup>18</sup> The no longer reassuring touch of the mother echoes the uncertainty and insecurity experienced by those who witnessed the decay of the regime and the renewal of its principal values and institutions, among them the enhancement of homemaking. Carlos's parents would have lived through the post-war years, so the principles of those times would have been passed on to him (Aguilar, 2002: 4-5). In this way, the pact of silence and delusion of wellbeing during the decades after the war would have been transmitted to Carlos by his parents and the media. However, distance has endowed him with a critical view/perspective whereby his former understanding of home is contrasted with the revelation afforded by his «dream» overseas. The recovery of a lost or forgotten past always comes at a price, and the «return of the repressed» poses a threat to one's subjectivity

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18 Acknowledging the scarcity of fantasy until the 1980s, Santiago Morales Rivera draws a connection between the surge of fantasy and horror after this date and the ending of the pact of silence through the Ley de Memoria Histórica of 2007, which allowed the disinterment and identification of human civil war remains (2017: 80).

(Tsuchiya, 2005: 100). Carlos's return exacts a personal price, destroying him, just as it will destroy his sisters.<sup>19</sup>

An analysis of this story within the parameters of hauntings demands mentioning Freud's often revisited ideas on the Uncanny (Freud, 2003), which bring the reading closer to hauntings and the horror genre. In «El ángulo del horror», Carlos's anguish derives from the fact that it is his own home that is terrifying him, and that he has nowhere else to retreat to. As a reversal of the siblings' ability to control nightmares, a dark side of the house and all it contains opens a gateway into the real world to show Carlos a face that is menacing and horrifying. A re-evaluation of taken for granted conceptions of the home reveals that harmony and comfort have been replaced by disgust and fear. For Carlos, torn between the horrific new face of the house and the fact it is, nevertheless, his home, this conflict results in his death. This fatalistic character again echoes Jackson's protagonist, whose refusal to leave Hill House also results in her death. The revelation experienced by Carlos, in fact, connects us to the writers themselves. Like Jackson, Fernández Cubas constructs the destructive side of the building on these conflicting contradictory feelings and as such exploits the same dynamic between need and rejection that employed *Hill House*.

It is interesting to note that information on the authors creative process at the time reveals further coincidence between the two writers: a defining significance of their unconscious. Both «El ángulo del horror» and *The Haunting of Hill House* were their respective authors' first horror story about houses, and both were inspired by a dream. In an interview with Kathleen Glenn, Fernández Cubas reveals that a dream provided her both with an unknown feeling of anguish about a house and with the title itself (2005: 17). In the case of Jackson, a dream caused her to sleepwalk and scribble some words on a blank piece of paper. In both cases the ripe literary materialisation of the negative side of houses took place not through conscious verbalisation in the symbolic order by means of conscious intentional creation, but through prior materialisation through dreams, a process closer to the semiotic. This circumstance points to the embedded psychological tensions at work regarding the idea of home being inspirational in shaping evil houses in modern women's fiction. «El ángulo del horror», thus, takes the house's leading role one step further than in «Mi hermana Elba»: not only can the building create changes in its occupants by interacting with them beyond the laws of nature, it can also mani-

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19 For more information on the recovery of historical memory or alternative consciousness through occupying the position of an outsider witness, see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992).

fest an evil, antagonistic side, ultimately causing the death of a tormented youth to then haunt others: a primary trait of the haunted house formula.

As her literary trajectory progresses, her houses become increasingly claustrophobic. «El lugar» (1994) also revolves around a particular building and a woman's longing for a home. It is a tribute to writers such as Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838-1889).<sup>20</sup> As the title announces, it incorporates the notion of having one's own place. The narrator, a lawyer, tells the story of his brief marriage to Clarisa, an orphan obsessed with finding a place of her own. On their wedding night, as she shows signs of profound satisfaction and harmony with her new home, she announces her intention of stopping her studies since she feels that she has found her place in their house: «This is my home (...). Here is my place» (Fernández Cubas, 1994: 103). Clarisa seems pleased, almost fusing with the armchair and the room, which looks like an extension of her own body: «Clarisa had merged with her surroundings», as if she had «dissolved» into them (1994: 102-103). During the following months, the narrator wonders at Clarisa's complacency and her obsession with the idea of «place»:

The *place*, for Clarisa, was (...) the magic word where the world's secret for happiness materialised. At times it was synonymous with «location»; at others it wasn't (...). To find the place, to be in her place, to put in its place, to be out of place... There was no innocence in her voice. Far from the place—in a spatial sense or any other sense— was the abyss, quicksands, uncertainty, distress (...). Her place was the house and myself, her husband» (1994: 105-106).

Clarisa's peace ends on the day she learns that there is a pantheon where she is expected to rest some day. It is an impressive, lavish construction built by a past domineering relative, Aunt Ricarda, who had decreed that all its members were to rest in the pantheon. After learning of the pantheon's existence, Clarisa begins to fade. Her husband attributes this to his clumsy words, which reminded Clarisa of her lack of a family. Gradually it becomes clearer that her concern is related to the very pantheon itself. In her illness, she claims that she can feel the relatives inside waiting for them. When she fearfully asks if she is indeed to be buried there, she gloomily remarks that in the pantheon she would have to start all over again (1994: 124). Her husband realises that «Clarisa was at all costs trying to regain [her place]» (1994: 127).

<sup>20</sup> Such a narrative structure is the basis for a large number of stories by Poe—as for example «Ligeia» (1838) and «Morella» (1835). Also, it is reminiscent of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's «Vera» (1995), first published in 1883.

Clarisa is buried in the pantheon but returns regularly in his dreams. Initially she is lonely and afraid, but she soon becomes acquainted with what she now calls «the house», describing it as large and with many rooms to accommodate all the relatives.

The widower falls into deep grief, which is worsened by the double life he leads: in sleep and wakefulness. As time passes, Clarisa transforms: the more confident she is with those in the pantheon, the less interested she seems in visiting. Eventually Clarisa's visits stop altogether, leading the narrator to search for her himself. He finds her surrounded by all his relatives, laughing in a strident, distressing manner. In a clearly referential image to empowerment, his wife wears a mantle over her shoulders, and her bare foot is crushing an old watch that he himself had given her before she died as a token to pass on to a dead relative when she arrived in the pantheon. She does not pay him any heed anymore and, when he calls her, his own mother tells him not to disturb Clarisa. After this vision, the narrator ceases contact with her spirit and moves house, closing the story by stating: «Clarisa had found *her* place. Fine. However, I, from this moment, was doing as much as I could to secure mine» (1994: 149).

«El lugar» is reminiscent of nineteenth-century Gothic narratives where love transcends death. They typically portray an inconsolable widower experiencing visits from his recently deceased wife. Balanced between the two antagonistic forces of love and the inevitability of death, these narratives work on the power of love blurring liminalities. Characteristically, the dead women are not portrayed as dangerous revenants but rather as uncanny, devoted, supernatural presences. «El lugar» however, alters the Romantic opposing pulls of love and death, distorting them into a desperate desire for a place, which will readily displace the husband and target the pantheon instead. The antagonistic pulls between death and love which brought Poe's brides back from the dead, here, in Clarisa, merge into one unique interest: a home.

This story highlights the increasing centre stage narrative presence of the building as a negative force. While the story shows no substantiation of Clarisa's love, it does provide abundant references to her eagerness to find a place. When she realises that her new home might just be transitory, she loses interest in the house, marriage and even life itself, and focuses all her attention on a permanent abode. This eerie construction exerts an extraordinary transformation of empowerment, which is enhanced by specific religious imagery, with Clarisa's portrayal clearly evoking representations of a childless Virgin Mary, clothed in a cloak and stepping on a snake. Similarly, Clarisa is wearing

an embroidered mantle and, significantly, is stepping on a watch, symbolising her triumph over time now she has gained her place in eternity, as opposed to her fleeting achievements in her marital home. Also, the watch, intended for a deceased male relative, symbolises that she is not subordinate to any other authority in the pantheon, as she has not delivered the gift and is proceeding to destroy it with the approval of the domineering matriarch Ricarda.

The narrative offers a mirror-like, symbolic reversal of the patriarchal order on the other side, even though the author herself has claimed not to follow feminist considerations or any other political positioning in her writings (Glenn, 1993: 361). A gender-oriented discussion of the dynamics of power echoes Virginia Woolf's call for a space free from homemaking expectations (Woolf, 2020). Indeed, Clarisa's trajectory exposes the gratuitous association between the home as shelter and female homemaking that is created by a patriarchal society. While her behaviour exemplifies the primary human territorial need for a place to call one's own, she simultaneously rejects the socially constructed feminine roles of childbearing and family caretaking. The pantheon gives her greater self-assertion and an autonomous life.

Once again, Fernández Cubas's fiction takes us back to Jackson's work. Early Clarisa echoes Jackson's character Eleanor, who is also submissive, homeless and eagerly dreaming of finding a place. Similarly, Clarisa is not interested in love or family, and shares the same disregard for children. Like Eleanor too, Clarisa is consumed by her cravings for a home and is seduced by the darkness of a haunted house. Although the reader is not told what Hill House will bring Eleanor after her death, there is no reason to discard the possibility that Eleanor may well find a similar empowerment to that of Clarisa, since Eleanor's growing closeness with Hill House increases her determination, assertiveness and self-reliance throughout the novel. Dead Clarisa, no longer compliant, also seems to be an empowered and intimidating woman. More specifically, she has come to control the house where initially she had merely been a docile guest. For both women, who suffer from what could be described as troubles of place, finding a place of their own involves finding themselves. Clarisa, once healthy and sane, will decline once she hears about the family pantheon, in the same way that Eleanor does when finding out about Hill House. The buildings will prey on their weakness, luring them into death through the promise of them finding their home.

The last story studied here, «La fiebre azul» (2006) deploys the clearest traits of sentience by presenting intentionality. Set in a village in Africa, the story concerns a professional forger looking for material to sell back in Europe.

He checks into the local hotel, Masajonia, where he feels strangely comfortable, «a forgotten sense of well-being» (Fernández Cubas, 2006: 12). Before long he discovers that the hotel has a bad name among the natives: all the rooms are numbered seven and the local word «heliobut» is whispered with fear whenever the hotel is mentioned. A white priest warns the protagonist that «heliobut» is an unexplainable evil «anonymous enemy» at the Masajonia which normally affects white people. The narrator himself confirms that there is *something* there which feels like an unspecified danger and a vague threat (2006: 13). This something, for example, had recently maddened an English guest who had died after killing several other people. Heliobut is much feared by the locals, including the caretaker, who under no circumstance stays overnight at the hotel.<sup>21</sup> During the following hours the forger meets other guests and befriends a painter who suffers from insomnia. Exploring the lobby, he also sees old photographs of the founders of the hotel: Elliot, Belinda and their children, an amiable and happy family. Later, as he walks back into the room, he is shocked to find his own body somehow sleeping on the bed. He observes the sleeper, who looks insignificant and shameful: «[I felt an] unbearable shame for the insignificant unworthy dregs that I had become... How insignificant I was!... I was nothing» (2006: 43).<sup>22</sup> The next morning he wakes up still in fright. He learns from his business partner that the founder, Belinda, was called Blue by the village, and that Heliobut is a local variation of Elliot-Blue, being the original name given by the locals to the building itself. Terrified, the forger finishes his business and flees the village in haste.

Back home in Spain he feels transformed. The experience at the hotel has gifted him a new dark awareness of himself and his life, and he grows suspicious of his wife and children. He now feels they do not love or respect him, and so he develops a strong dislike for them. The domestic workers in his house notice his behaviour, mistakenly believing that he has been subject to a curse. To make matters worse, his wife grows jealous when he repeats the word «blue» in his dreams (2006: 57, 62). Feeling out of place at home, he decides to leave again on business, this time to China.

After a series of coincidences pointing to the number seven and Africa during his trip —such as seating arrangements and the detouring of the flights—, he impulsively decides to go back to the Masajonia, eerily driven by

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21 This again echoes the caretakers in Hill House, the Dudleys, who repeatedly warn visitors that under no circumstance would they stay on the premises after dark (Jackson, 1999: 39).

22 The story «La casa vacía» by David Roas follows a similar plot line, in which the narrator can see himself in the interior of an eerie, mysterious house (2018).



an external force: «(It) was the most important decision in my life (...). I helped fate — or should I call it providence?» (2006: 65). There, he runs into the painter, who has undergone a similar revelation while away, not being able to paint or sleep away from the hotel. He then sees that other travellers he had met on his first visit have also been lured back by the hotel. The closing lines state the narrator's happiness when the receptionist welcomes him back: «for the first time in a long time, I felt at home» (2006: 68). With this closing, the doomed narrator gives himself to the building, oblivious to the local warnings and even the supernatural events he had experienced.

«La fiebre azul», chronologically the last of the four stories, seems to be at the peak of a progression that can be traced back to «Mi hermana Elba», showing a process of maturation towards the destructive sentience of haunted houses.<sup>23</sup> Not only does the Masajonia hotel disrupt the conventions around the house as place of refuge (Cabrera Espinosa, 2021: 411), but also seduce the guests and seduce them by exacerbating and exposing their weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Once again, it is the desire to feel at home which restores and sacrifices the characters to the building. The story concludes with the narrator feeling that he has found this *home*, contrasting with the reader's awareness of the doom-laden prospects. It should be stressed that there is no past tragedy, curse, or plausible explanation to account for the destructive potential of this building, which could also be said of the three narratives discussed previously. Fernández Cubas thus partakes of the tradition begun by Jackson where there is no traumatic or demonic history that might account for the curse. Instead, the building is simply wrong and vicious, suggesting traits of intentionality.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As has been noted, in fiction by Cristina Fernández Cubas homelessness reveals itself to act as a key driving force. Still today, when compared to Spanish horror stories of a later date, Fernández Cubas's stories have distinctive traits: limited violence, no backstory, and a particular representation of human attachment from which tension escalates, ultimately converging into a fear that streams from the characters' vulnerability about *home*. In addition, her characters share the particularity that, while they are aware of the oddities

23 «La fiebre azul» also invites a postcolonial reading where the forgers European corrupted characters contrast with the genuine locals and their deeper understanding of their land the particularities of the hotel.

about the buildings, in their need for a home they see no other option than to meekly surrender themselves to the house.

In «Mi hermana Elba» the main theme is constituted by a gradual surrendering to supernatural incidents, which ultimately prove to be a fatal influence. Elba's tragedy begins when the relationship with her family home is altered: put into a boarding school and then sent to a second special institution, each increasing her sense of isolation. She ultimately realises that the home she knew is never to be restored, breaking her spirit, and precipitating her death. Similar dynamics apply in the second story, «El ángulo del horror»: the siblings' gift of lucidity allows them to distil and expose the terrifying occult face of their home and all it contains depending on the angle of the observer, as the title appropriately suggests. In this haunting, which ultimately will cause the death of the children, the inhabitants become puppets of the sentient force, changed into daunting versions of themselves.<sup>24</sup> Again, loss of home is a pivotal force for the narrative of fear to succeed, as the monster-like house rises where the familiar and strange merge into one (King, 1993: 65; Carroll, 1990: 47). As a third exponent, «El lugar» starts by establishing the distress of an orphan in her homelessness, with the subsequent decay and loss brought about by trying to find a home at a wrong place. Lastly, «La fiebre azul» emerges as the closest approach to narratives of malignant houses, haunting passers-by into believing they can no longer exist away from the building.

Through these pages I have sought to highlight the parallelisms between Fernández Cubas's stories and Shirley Jackson's novel regarding the notion of home. In a similar lure to that of the protagonist of *The Haunting of Hill House*, the need for home is what dooms Fernández Cubas's characters as they yield to the house. A contextualisation of the time of writing also exposes social tensions related to homemaking surrounding the authors. In his study of horror fiction, Stephen King posits that horror arises when a sensitive point has been touched, since the horror story works on these anxieties by exercising matters which are unsuitable for open discussion: «[H]orror appeals to us because it offers (...) us a chance to exercise (...) emotions which society demands we keep closely in hand» (1993: 47). It is at this sensitive point, when the wanted and the feared merge into one, that the home might mutate into the uncanny two-faced entity. The four stories considered in this study involve inner spaces to the point where the buildings become active agents,

<sup>24</sup> A choral group of trapped victims is one of the current common features of sentient house. See Elia Barcelo's «La Maga» (2015) and Netflix's free adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* (Flanagan, 2018).

exemplifying, on a lesser scale, the alterations to the trope occurred in mid-twentieth century North American mainstream fiction. Their contribution to the genre in Spain should be acknowledged, as they opened the doors to the current surge of sentient house stories.

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