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The Disempowerment of Women in the Domestic Sphere:
The Fiction of Amy Witting (1918 – 2001)

ABSTRACT

This article examines ways in which the fiction of the acclaimed Australian writer Amy Witting, dubbed Australia’s Chekov and whom Helen Garner acknowledged as her ‘literary mother,’ interrogates the disempowerment of women in the domestic sphere, asserting that the home is a contested space and conflicted place for women. Witting subverts the notion that a ‘woman’s place is in the home’ by demonstrating that many women are actually displaced and dispossessed in the inhibiting domestic spaces that are their ‘homes.’ In her fiction, women are isolated and excluded because of gender inequity in regard to women’s rights and duties in the domestic sphere. Women are also marginalised in regard to inadequate financial rewards for domestic productivity and are affected by circumstances underpinned by discourses of poverty, class conflict and domestic violence. Witting asserts that the disempowerment of women in the home often leads to women appropriating masculinist attitudes and behaviours of oppression towards other women less powerful than themselves. In this article, these concepts are explored with close reference to five of Witting’s novels and interviews conducted with the author.

BIOGRAPHY

Colleen Smee is a full time PhD student in the School of English, Communication and Performance Studies at Monash University. She is writing her thesis on the fiction of the Australian author Amy Witting. The thesis is entitled An Examination of a Woman’s Place in the Fiction of Amy Witting. Colleen previously lectured and tutored in the School of Humanities, Media and Cultural Studies at Southern Cross University.
THE DISEMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN THE DOMESTIC SPHERE: THE FICTION OF AMY WITTING (1918 – 2001)

Amy Witting revealed in June 1990: ‘I was a closet feminist, but not anymore. I always wanted to be a writer but didn’t think I was good enough because I was a woman. ... Why do women think that sort of thing? Power is such a terrible thing.’ The fiction of Amy Witting is primarily concerned with empowering women by giving them a voice. In order to tell women’s stories, Witting’s focus is usually placed within the domestic sphere, thereby enabling her to reveal the truth of women’s narratives long silenced within the discourses of patriarchy. Commenting on the important role of her fiction, Witting maintained:

Good fiction really is enhancement. I mean it’s bringing the issues out into the clear ... it sums up the stoppage of ‘you will be punished if you speak’ ... and so the craft of the story comes as part of itself, but then speaks the message afterwards.1

One of the most important messages that Witting wishes to bring ‘into the clear’ in her novels and short stories is the disempowerment of women within the domestic sphere. Rather than empowering women in their own special place, Witting maintains that the domestic sphere subordinates and inhibits women, reduces their economic status and in many cases threatens their safety. Therefore, in Witting’s fiction, there is a strong link between domestic spaces and the disempowerment of women. Her writing asserts that this disempowerment was a normative practice of the discourses operating in mid-twentieth century Australian society, the time period in which much of Witting’s fiction is placed. This article examines the ways in which female subjectivity is affected by the domestic places inhabited by women represented in her fiction, with particular reference to The Visit (1977), I For Isobel (1989), A Change in the Lighting (1994), Maria’s War (1998) and Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop (1999).2

Witting’s credibility as a writer worthy of scholarly research is well established, yet despite her literary achievements there has been little scholarly analysis of her work. Her most famous novel, I For Isobel, was the winner of the FAW Barbara Ramsden Award in 1989, while the sequel Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop won the Age Book of the Year Award, as well as the best novel, in 2000. Her poetry and short stories have also received high acclaim. Two of her short stories were published in The New Yorker and the collection of short stories Marriages was short listed for the Age Book of the Year Award in 1990.3 Amy Witting was awarded the prestigious Patrick White Award in 1993. She was seventy five at the time and went on to achieve the pinnacle of her success over the next eight years until her death in 2001. Patrick White and other highly-acclaimed writers, such as Thea Astley, Janette Turner Hospital and Helen Garner, all praised Witting’s writing. Garner stated in a letter dated 24 October 1989 to Amy Witting that she regarded Witting as her literary mother.4 Witting was admitted posthumously in 2002 as a Member of the Order of Australia for her services to literature, as a novelist, poet, short story writer and mentor to younger writers.

Witting’s fiction addresses issues of poverty (particularly for young, single, self-supporting women) and the consequent disempowerment of these women is linked to the sub-standard places in which they live. Women represented in Witting’s fiction are often depicted as living in one-roomed domestic spaces. Within these spaces, they are excluded from the prevailing discourses associated with the assumption of a high standard of living in mid-to-late twentieth century Australian society. These situations depicted in the novels and short stories are, in the main, autobiographical; Witting herself faced the same poverty-stricken living conditions as her characters, while the rooms are set in the same areas in Sydney and Kempsey in which Witting lived between the ages of 17 and 30. She has acknowledged that the Isobel novels are autobiographical and her own poverty while attending university was extreme.5 When Witting completed her Diploma in Education in 1939, she was unable to afford...

6 Amy Witting, Maria’s War (Ringwood: Penguin, 1998).
they live. Gaston Bachelard suggests that the physical setting of a house can be seen as a metaphor for subjectivity itself and Witting employs this technique in circumstances are underpinned by the same societal conventions that disempower women in the places in which women, divorced women and women in retirement hostels in her narratives, demonstrating how differing circumstances are underpinned by the same societal conventions that disempower women in the places in which they live. Gaston Bachelard suggests that the physical setting of a house can be seen as a metaphor for subjectivity itself and Witting employs this technique in *The Visit* and *A Change in the Lighting*. Bachelard further postulates that there is ‘ground for taking the house as a tool of analysis of the human soul. ... [B]y remembering “houses” and “rooms”, we learn to “abide” within ourselves.’ This metaphorical representation situates the house as a template of the human soul, providing stability, safety, contentment and love. However, most of the female characters represented in Witting’s fiction, are confined, haunted, threatened and ultimately damaged by the memories of ‘the houses and rooms [that] abide within [them]selves.’ Therefore, Witting, while still supporting Bachelard’s idea, subverts his philosophy because the people who live in Witting’s houses or one room flats are, for the most part, denied love or suffer the loss of love.

Domestic places influence the fictive lives of every major female character represented in Witting’s novels, especially Barbara Somers in *The Visit* and Ella Ferguson in *A Change in the Lighting*. Witting often uses bedsitter rooms or rooms in boarding houses as the *home* for the women in the narratives. However, in both *The Visit* and *A Change in the Lighting*, a house is given a central position. In *The Visit*, the house is described in detail and Witting underpins this representation with psychoanalytic symbolism, so that the house is employed as a means of delineating the representations of the characters and their inter-relationships. The house, a stately home with wide verandahs and luxurious interiors, including a crystal chandelier in the entrance hall, is built on the southern bank of the river in the fictional town of Bangoree: ‘from here the house was visible on the river bank, the sight of its lighted windows made Barbara pause.’ This house is given the status of a character and, in keeping with Bachelard’s interpretation, the house is described as having its own ‘soul.’ ‘It has a soul. I [Naomi] like that in a house’. . . . Barbara liked it too and was proud of the fluted pillars, the cast-iron balcony, the long windows opening onto the tiled verandah – shabby elegance imbued with melancholy, evoking old ambitions.

Despite its obvious appeal, this setting of ‘the old Dutton house’ depicts the isolation and marginalization of one of the major female characters, Barbara Somers. She has married Robert Somers, whose matriarchal family owned the lovely stately home on the river. Barbara is represented as a gentle, beautiful woman whom Robert loves, but she is the daughter of a widowed corner-shop proprietor and was born and raised ‘on the wrong side of the tracks’ in Bangoree. The implications of cross-class families and the extent to which class exerts an influence on marriage commitments lead to a bitter contest for power and ownership of the house. The house represents the duel that takes place between two women, Robert’s mother and Robert’s wife, each trying to find her own place: *where* she belongs, and *what* belongs to her within this space. Barbara tells her mother-in-law

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15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 2.
19 Ibid., 85.
20 Ibid., 82.
that the ‘house is in my name as well as Robert’s, and I’d gone back to work to pay off the bank loan.’

However, the old woman continues to make references to ‘my house.’ Barbara consequently tells Peter (the son of her friend Naomi) that her mother-in-law ‘thinks this is her house, you see.’

Ironically, it is also suggested that perhaps the house itself does not belong in Bangoree. Naomi says to Barbara: ‘Your poor house ... sitting there longing with all its soul for Paddington.’

In acknowledging the ‘soul’ of the house, Barbara is searching for her own soul, if only the ghosts of the house can be exorcised. Her attempts to regain her ‘rightful’ place in the house, despite the fact that she went back to work to pay off the mortgage, are never really successful. The house belonged to her husband’s family and is still known as the old Dutton place. Barbara exists within its rooms as a type of servant, providing the meals, nursing the old woman and always feeling inadequate. Witting demonstrates, in regard to Barbara’s situation, that until women are empowered personally, economically and politically by and within their domestic sphere, they will remain displaced, alienated and dispossessed within their so-called home.

Witting continues the complex delineation of the triangular nature of the relationships in the Dutton house, because the reader is reminded that the elder Mrs. Somers is reduced to being homeless, dependent on her sons and daughters-in-law for a place to live, despite the negative representation of her in the novel. Peter’s question to old Mrs. Somers - ‘Where’s your house?’ - reinforces the old woman’s dispossession, for she no longer has a place of her own. Ivy, her other daughter-in-law, refuses to have her in Grafton and by the end of the novel, ‘a place was found for old Mrs. Somers in a nursing home in Grafton. ...’

This is a clever technique to evoke sympathy for the vindictive mother-in-law, as it causes the reader to contemplate the reasons underlying the cruel behaviour of women towards other women, thereby exposing the extent to which discourses associated with control, domination and subjugation of females have been, and are being, appropriated and perpetuated by women themselves. Witting asserted: ‘The greatest shame of our generation was the way women treated other women.’

Social feminists such as Annette Kuhn examined the ideologies that generate male/female power relationships which favour males in westernised societies. Kuhn seeks to emphasise ‘the ideological construction of women as subjects who think and act in ways that serve the interests of males across all classes.’ It can thus be conjectured that women who are denied power in their relationships with males, such as their husbands and/or sons, often impose control or domination over other women, whom they perceive as less powerful than themselves. In this way, women become complicit in their own ‘emplacement’ and disempowerment, in regard to male domination in the domestic environment of the home and family.

A Change in the Lighting also employs a house as a major setting and trope. This novel is the converse of The Visit in that the main character, Ella Ferguson, does belong in her home. This house is her place, but, as in The Visit, this place becomes a contested space. The basic question of identity for Ella is not so much ‘Who am I?’ but ‘Where am I?’ – place becomes synonymous with self. The settings in A Change in the Lighting are internal spaces rather than external, focusing on domestic activities, so that Ella’s house in Acacia Heights, a leafy green northern suburb of Sydney, assumes major importance. Witting’s dominant representation of Ella Ferguson is that of the accomplished, proud homemaker. In his book The Practice of Everyday Life, the renowned ethnologist, sociologist and historian Michel de Certeau privileges the everyday lives of women and homemaking skills, particularly emphasising the importance of culinary skills. De Certeau argues:

[With] their high degree of ritualization and their strong affective investment, culinary activities are for many women of all ages a place of happiness, pleasure and discovery. Such life activities demand as much intelligence, imagination, and memory as those traditionally held superior, such as music and weaving.

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21 Ibid., 7.
22 Ibid., 7, 106.
23 Ibid., 107.
24 Ibid., 2.
25 Ibid., 106.
26 Ibid., 235.
Ella’s culinary skills are applauded throughout the novel and afford her a ‘place of happiness, pleasure and discovery,’ as do her skills in craft (rug-making) and her ability to create a beautiful home environment. Nevertheless, these activities are also associated with the discourse of domestic service. It is significant that Ella is not involved in her husband’s professional world, though ironically she became the ‘breadwinner’ to enable him to finish medical school when they were first married. Ella’s initial role in the marriage literally supported and upheld the patriarchal power structure. However, once her husband had achieved success, Ella’s role reverted to the domestic sphere. Ella seems cocooned in the safe, domestic world, centred on her house, which she has woven around herself. Susan Faludi discusses this aspect of female disempowerment in the 1970s and beyond, claiming: ‘They were still on the inside looking out; they were still clambering along the wallboards. 

Therefore, in both novels Witting features a house that becomes a contested, conflicted place for each woman, which thus causes the erosion of her own identity and self-worth. It can be argued that the contestation of domestic space is a major contributor to disharmony and even violence in the home. In his examination of contemporary Western society, Ali Mandanipour investigates the wants and needs of the members of a family, both individual and collective, scrutinising the ways they compete within the home for personal and interpersonal space. Mandanipour asserts that ‘home ... is where the personal and interpersonal meet, where private and semi-private spheres are juxtaposed.’ This contest for space creates tensions in the home. Witting demonstrates in her fiction that this is particularly destructive for women in the family, because of their assignation to the home as the domestic service provider, but with little or no power in regard to property ownership and decision-making within the home. Linda Young suggests:

The inclusion in the fiction of realistic domestic details such as meal preparation, house cleaning and organisation of daily routines is employed by Witting to underpin the major concerns of ordinary women confined to the ‘home.’ This method effectively allows Witting’s novels to bring ‘the issues out into the clear ... and speak the message afterwards.’

Witting’s fiction also examines issues associated with discourses of class and gender that underpin the ways in which domestic settings affect the lives of her female characters. The novels and short stories demonstrate that women are rarely ‘at home’ within this domestic space. Although the treatment of women, as well as the attitudes, values and beliefs in relation to female subjectivity have changed over time, it remains significant that the domestic spaces inhabited by women have largely remained the same in regard to familiar gender roles. This is particularly true for the kitchen and the bedroom. These are usually gendered spaces, reflecting the minutiae of everyday life as well as the personality of the female, so that her subjectivity is connected intimately with the inhabited spaces of domestic life. However, while Witting emphasises the importance of the kitchen as a gendered space in most of her narratives, the bedrooms are not depicted as intimate female spaces. There are no inclusions of typically feminine furnishings or personal belongings. Instead, the bedrooms are depicted as contested spaces: either as the fractured marital space in A Change in the Lighting or the constrained space shared by siblings described in I For Isobel. Bedsitter rooms are also contested places as they serve as living and kitchen spaces, where the bed is an intrusion. The only personal touches which Witting includes in bedrooms and bedsitter spaces are the protagonist’s books: ‘[s]he unpacked them first: Keats, Shelley, Byron, Shakespeare.’ This is an indication of the priorities both of the protagonist and the author herself, to escape from the confines of the domestic sphere to other worlds accessed through literature.

Therefore, as demonstrated by the pessimistic representation of women’s everyday lives in her fiction, Witting claimed that the assignation of women primarily to the domestic setting had such an adverse effect that ‘women

30 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 17.
35 Witting, I For Isobel, 48.
were not a happy race, and that’s a fact." Witting significantly assigns the term ‘race’ to women in this comment, inferring that women were, and continue to be, set apart from men and perceived as ‘the other’ in regard to their position in the home and in the wider society. In addition, it needs to be acknowledged that Witting’s personal viewpoints, reflected in her fiction, are coloured by her own unhappy childhood home and her relative ‘placeless’ state, residing in a series of boarding houses until she was well into her thirties. She had very negative perceptions of boarding houses, cynically stating ‘I’ve lived in them all my life.’ Consequently, Witting employs an ironic contestation of the aphorism that a woman’s place is in the home by subverting this concept to demonstrate women’s displacement, alienation and dispossession within the home and other domestic settings.

The social construction of women as homemakers has been critiqued by feminist theorists. For example, Catherine Mackinnon claims that longstanding patterns of gender discrimination are reinforced by taking male-defined norms as the standard against which to weigh women’s claims to equal treatment. Mackinnon asserts that it is strategically dangerous to promote a female ethic of care, since this may reinforce deeply ingrained stereotypes about women’s place being ‘in the home.’ This has the potential to constrain ‘women and men in their fashioning of their individual lives as sexuate beings.’ Furthermore, in the political and economic system of Australia in the 1990s, it was difficult for women to use the law as a vehicle for equality, because a woman’s success was perceived to be based on her ‘duty toward others rather than toward herself.’ This is demonstrated in A Change in the Lighting when the Ferguson children would prefer to leave the lawyers out of private family matters, thinking selfishly of their own welfare. However, Ella’s son-in-law Max, the pragmatist, points out:

‘How can we leave the lawyers out of it? Divorce is a matter for the law, is it not? And the law is a matter for lawyers, I think. If you want to watch Mother’s interests, you will go to a lawyer who specialises in divorce.’

It is hugely ironic that Max and Ella’s son David employ a female lawyer, Mary Duckworth, to look after ‘Mother’s interests,’ but ultimately Ella still loses her house and is consigned to a financial and social limbo after the divorce settlement.

The findings of social theorists such as Meredith Edwards reinforce this issue, which Witting explores in A Change in the Lighting. Edwards maintains that, after divorce, ‘women without their own earnings, who did not manage family finances, were the most financially vulnerable because of their near total dependence on their husband’s income.’ Witting, in an interview, also discussed this issue:

I was shocked to learn that there was another underclass of women who had slipped under the radar so to speak. They were divorced middle-class women who had lost their family home. They were usually given a sum of money for their half of the house, but it was all the money they had, so by the time they bought ‘a nice little unit’ - I used that phrase in A Change in the Lighting - they had nothing much left to live on ... They had been working unpaid for 30 years some of them, in the family home and the courts should have taken this into account, but of course this never happened.

Witting believed that pursuits traditionally associated with women are undervalued in society which leads to disempowerment of the female in family relationships. The feminist social theorist Betsy Wearing maintains:

[In regard to domestic home duties, married women would earn far more than married men. Specifically they would earn 83.2 hours times the award rate, as against men who would earn 36.4 hours of paid

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38 Catherine Mackinnon, Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 38.
39 Ibid.
41 Mackinnon, Feminism Unmodified, 38.
42 Witting, A Change in the Lighting, 51.
44 Smee, Interviews with Amy Witting, 1996, 23.
domestic work. Women do this for ‘love’ which diminishes their economic independence and their power in the family.’

Consequently, if women were paid for their domestic duties, their wage would, in many cases, far outstrip that of the male ‘breadwinner’ in the family, based on basic hourly wage rates.

In *A Change in the Lighting*, the reader first meets Ella in the bedroom of her house, sitting ‘on the edge of the unmade bed’ in her nightgown, dressing-gown and slippers. She is already reduced in status by her clothing and the fact that her husband is busily engaged in securing the item of his masculine professional status, his tie. Meeting her gaze in the mirror, without even bothering to look at her directly, Bernard, her husband, announced abruptly:

‘Ella! Things can’t go on as they are you know. I think divorce is the best solution for all concerned ... Louise and I are lovers. We have been lovers for some time. We want to marry. Therefore I am asking you for a divorce.’

Witting satirises this place and situation because Ella’s husband, in the intimate space of their bedroom, with his own reflection in the mirror as the major focus, announces that he wants to end their marriage of thirty-two years. The lack of importance of Ella in the marriage and her role as servant rather than wife is emphasized by Witting when Bernard asks, a few moments after the divorce revelation, ‘Have I any clean socks?’ From this point, the very beginning of the novel, the narrative focuses on Ella’s reactions to the shock divorce announcement and reveals how she reconstructs her life to adjust to the ‘change in the lighting.’ Witting, via the character of Ella, explores the enigmatic elements of the patriarchal assumption that a ‘woman’s place is in the home,’ unless of course her ex-husband no longer wants her in his home. Ella is represented as a victim of her husband’s adultery. She is given a paltry fortnightly allowance and many pleas for more money are ignored by her husband. Ella is also deprived of her car: ‘She hadn’t had a car to drive since the event. He had driven off in it and that was that.’

Through this situation in the novel, Witting is raising awareness of an issue very important to her own social consciousness, which is the effect of poverty on the life choices of women. In *A Change in the Lighting*, it is the middle-aged, middle-class divorced women who are represented. After the divorce, although Ella receives a sum of money from her share of the house, she is dispossessed of her rights and her home, despite the years of domestic service. When her husband first reveals to Ella the facts about his adultery and asks for the divorce, it never occurs to her that her house will become contested property. She screamed: ‘Get out. Get out of this house and stay out.’ Therefore, losing the house, her special place, has a profound effect on Ella: ‘I am alone with this. No-one can know the horror I am fighting. ... They could not understand the bottomless terror she felt at the thought of losing her house.’ At the end of the novel, Ella is persuaded to use the money from the divorce settlement to finance a home for her son and his wife; she will reside with them, to enable her to once again live in a house instead of a small unit. However, the daughter-in-law declares: ‘You’ll have to be cook.’ Witting’s positioning of Ella as the domestic service provider in her son’s house further disempowers and marginalises her in society. Her new ‘place’ will be economically, socially and culturally inferior to that which she occupied before the divorce. Witting interrogates these issues pertaining to divorce in *A Change in the Lighting*, particularly in regard to property settlement and apportioning monetary entitlements.

The other group of women living alone who are disadvantaged in regard to property ownership and accruing adequate income are single women. Witting’s fiction, particularly *I For Isobel* and the first section of *Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop*, addresses the difficulties faced by these women. Discourses associated with poverty demonstrate the ways single women living alone in one room flats in inner city Sydney are extremely isolated and marginalised. In *Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop*, Olive, talking about the attic room in inner Sydney which Isobel was renting when she became ill ‘paused in remembered horror. ‘Isobel! That place!’

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47 Ibid., 2-3.
48 Ibid., 4.
49 Ibid., 79.
50 Ibid., 3.
51 Ibid., 247, 151.
52 Ibid., 287.
Isobel whispered ‘The rent was cheap. I kept myself to myself.’ 53 Single women living alone, like Isobel, may have the ‘room of one’s own’ prescribed by Virginia Woolf as essential for female independence, yet if they are minus ‘five hundred pounds a year,’54 they are disempowered and extremely vulnerable.55 Woolf stated ‘five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate, a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself.’56 However, in Isobel’s case, the lock on the door meant she lived in such dire poverty that she became dangerously ill. Witting, in her writing, was influenced by the feminist theories of Virginia Woolf, because as she stated: ‘her [Woolf’s] philosophy directly reflected my situation. Without a secure income, unlike Jim, I couldn’t indulge my passion as a writer. I had to go out teaching instead. Ironically, this eventually inspired my writing but at the time [1939] I was terrified.’57

Another issue which underpins much of Witting’s fiction in regard to a woman’s place in the home is the prevalence of domestic violence. Witting challenges the assumptions of the ideologies which have surrounded the family in westernised societies. These ideologies represent the ‘norm’ as a happily functioning traditional nuclear family, whereas feminist approaches have uncovered conflict and violence in the family as potentialities within its very structure.58 In Witting’s fiction, dysfunctional relationships, conflict and violence are repeatedly represented in the narratives. Therefore, as her fiction focuses on domestic settings, most of the conflict and violence occurs in the home. Social theorists generally agree that men’s rape and assault of women, particularly in the domestic setting, reflect a masculinist discourse of domination, control, humiliation, and degradation of women.59 Kate Millett supports this view and maintains that literature has a part to play in challenging the sexual power and violence of masculinist discourses: ‘To question the representation of a raped woman in literature is to demystify patriarchal representations and hence subvert the roles played by rape and the fear of rape, in the power that men have over women.’60

Witting recognises the role that her fiction can play in the interrogation of the norms associated with the misrepresentations of women in literature. In The Visit, Neil’s violent sexual advances towards Cathy demonstrate the assertion that violence against women is more often than not perpetrated by a person known to the victim. Neil’s appalling reaction, after the assault, is to think only of any repercussions for himself: ‘Seeing her so distraught, hearing her frantic breathing, brought the word rape into his mind. The dangers ... how a man could get caught.’61 Cathy’s reaction – keeping her silence and blaming herself - is also very common for women after an assault occurs. Maggie Humm, commenting on Samuel Richardson’s Clarissa (1748), discusses how female subjectivities are created not only by gendered language but also by the gaps and silences in the text, particularly after incidents of violence. According to Humm, ‘it is not only about a woman raped and excluded from speech, but also about a woman who, like many women, excludes herself from speech.’62 Witting employs this technique in the subjectification of Cathy, as well as Barbara, in The Visit and elsewhere in her fiction. The incident in The Visit when Phil Truebody has sexual intercourse with Barbara could also be seen as a form of rape. Witting uses images redolent with sexual violence as she describes Phil’s initial physical contact with Barbara:

He seized her by the elbows and was saying, ‘Don’t take on!’ when lust started in the palms of his hands, ran over his skin like a bushfire, and set off an explosion that picked him up and hurled him against her.

... Barbara! Barbara! He felt the animal tense with life and thrusting for home against her thighs.63

Witting’s choice of vocabulary such as ‘seized’ and ‘hurled,’ as well as the violent imagery, demands that the reader interpret this as an act of rape. Witting includes these types of sexual incidents in most of her novels to demonstrate the sexual exploitation of females by males, when the male is in a position of power, both physically and psychologically. This was particularly the case in regard to Phil Truebody, who was the attending

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53 Witting, Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop, 211.
54 Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own (Sydney: Granada, 1977), 70.
55 Ibid., five hundred pounds was enough to ensure financial independence.
56 Ibid., 70.
57 ‘Jim’ refers to James McAuley, the renowned Australian poet, who was a close friend of Witting during her time at Sydney University. Colleen Smeed, Interviews with Amy Witting, (unpublished: 1998), 23.
59 Mackinnon, Feminism Unmodified, 41.
60 Kate Millett, Sexual Politics (London: Abacus, 1971), 76.
61 Witting, The Visit, 104.
63 Witting, The Visit, 215.
medical physician in Barbara’s home. Phil leaves town the next week, while Barbara is beset with guilt and remorse for months. In this section of *The Visit*, Witting wishes to draw attention to how domestic violence, particularly sexual violence, can result in the female being affected by feelings of guilt, shame and worthlessness, even though she is the victim of a crime, not the perpetrator.

In Witting’s novel *Maria’s War*, the depiction of a rape of a woman in the domestic space of her home, is particularly distressing. Part of this novel deals with a refugee woman and her child fleeing across Germany during World War Two. In these chapters, Witting foregrounds issues relating to the treatment of women during wartime. One incident involves the rape of a German woman in her kitchen by the foreign worker who has been assigned to her farm while her husband is away in the armed forces. He threatens Rosa with a knife and also threatens her child. The woman’s instinct to protect her child causes her to submit to the rape without resistance. It is thus demonstrated that women, raped by a physically more powerful adversary, particularly if he has a weapon, will submit in order to survive. Carol Smart argues that ‘rape depends centrally upon women being able to prove effectively, beyond all reasonable doubt, that they did not consent.’ Therefore, the fact that the woman did not fight off her attacker is often used as a means of dismissing the charge in court. The long term effect of a violent rape is one of the most hidden issues in society because the most common long term effects of sexual assault can be invisible, particularly the psychological effects. Witting describes these symptoms in the novel as being experienced by both the mother Rosa and her daughter Liesl. The recounting of the rape in *Maria’s War* via the words of the child (now a middle aged woman) under hypnosis is particularly harrowing: ‘He’s the man who milks the cows! He comes through the back door. He shouldn’t be in the kitchen! He picks up the big chopping knife off the block. Mutti is frightened. She pushes me into my secret room under the table.’

Witting’s most famous novel, *I For Isobel*, is also underpinned by relentless violence and abuse in the family home. The violence is not sexual in this novel; rather, it is covert violence in the home, focusing on the mother/child relationship. The incident of the mother ripping up the yellow dress (a gift from an aunt intended for Isobel) because she cannot bear to see her daughter possessing the beautiful dress which promised sunshine and happiness, is particularly disturbing. Towards the end of the novel, the visit to Mrs. Adam’s house, when Isobel returns to her childhood suburb as a young adult, demonstrates the exclusion of Isobel from a safe, happy childhood in the family home. Isobel realises that the fears instilled into her about Mrs. Adams were her parents’ lies designed to intimidate and isolate Isobel: ‘Artesian tears, rising from the centre of the earth. ... Bastards, bastards, bastards. Cruel deceitful bastards.’ Her mother’s treatment of Isobel demonstrates the need to disempower a child whose intellectual superiority threatens the power and authority of the mother. Witting’s application of memory in *I For Isobel* contradicts patriarchal assumptions that the home is a repository of happy childhood memories. In *Poetics of Space*, Bachelard claimed that, in regard to the childhood home, ‘we comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection.’ However, for Isobel and most of Witting’s other character representations, there is no such protection afforded in the domestic places and spaces in their lives.

Witting’s interpretation is supported by feminist writers and artists such as the French artist, Louise Bourgeois, whose *Femme/Maison* (1946-47) drawings depict negative representations of women in the home. Bourgeois’ contentious images of women’s bodies with a house for a head were a precursor to the American Betty Friedan’s work on female domesticity in *The Feminine Mystique*. Friedan claimed:

> A Geiger counter clicked in my own inner ear when I could not fit the quiet desperation of so many women into the picture of the modern American happy housewife created by the women’s magazines, advertisements and television.

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66 Witting, *Maria’s War*, 221.
68 Ibid., 154.
70 Louise Bourgeois, *Femme/Maison* (New York: Cheim and Reid, 2003), 324.
72 Ibid., 30.
In Bourgeois’ work, the house which inscribes the female in the domestic, is ‘a space of self-denial and leads to the subject’s annihilation since it is an intimidating place of coercion.’ Witting also depicts the home as an ‘intimidating place of coercion,’ linking this to domestic violence issues in the novels. Every woman (or girl) affected by the violence suffers from guilt, low self-esteem and self-blame because of the violence. Barbara loathes herself because of the sexual act with Phil Truebody; Ella persuades herself that she is unfit to share a house with her son; Rosa believes she deserves the treatment from her daughter because of the rape and accepts displacement; Isobel is so scarred that she cannot accept offers of love from anyone. For these women, their ‘place’ in the home is always a contested space.

Consequently, in the fiction of Amy Witting, a woman’s place in the domestic space that serves as her home is, for the most part, ‘not a happy place, and that’s a fact.’ Witting’s autobiographical novels, _I For Isobel_ and _Isobel on the Way to the Corner Shop_, allow her to tell her own story, a story silenced for fifty years. She commented: ‘I had over a long period of time to conquer the truth of that situation, but I couldn’t do it with fact, I had to do it with fiction ... the terrible truth of fiction.’ These terrible truths are usually rooted in the domestic places of women’s lives and hence the domestic place is a very important aspect of Witting’s fiction. Through her writing, Witting has acquired her own power and earned respect so that her voice has made a significant contribution to the empowerment of women and the ‘stoppage of ‘you will be punished if you speak’.’

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73 Bourgeois, _Femme/Maison_, 324.
74 Smee, _Interviews with Amy Witting_, 1996, 16
75 Ibid., 3.
76 Ibid., 17.