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AUTHOR Karch, Linda
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ABSTRACT

Book-length works of nonfiction prose are seldom the object of study when college English teachers, rhetoricians, or theorists are engaged in practicing their profession. Phyllis Frus McCord (in "Reading Nonfiction in Composition Courses: From Theory to Practice" 1985) proposes that the goal should be "to break down the hard line between literature...and nonliterary texts." One way of doing this is by analyzing nonfiction prose by explicating such elements as character and image. In Tracy Kidder's book "House," the interaction between character and image moves the reader from the world of the actual to the mythic, imaginative world of archetypal symbols, the shaping principle of this literary work. The house functions as a symbol in the meaning it assumes for each individual: traditions, control, status, new beginnings, making a mark, rebellion, good-will, artistic, aesthetic, and accomplishment. The house functions as a symbol in what it means as the representation, on a more universal level, of the notion of continuity: homeownership, orientation, art, rituals, celebration and ceremony, and the spiritual flow of creativity. (Author/RS)

Analyzing Nonfiction Prose

House As Symbol

by

Linda Karch

English and Integrating Studies

Norwich University

Northfield and Montpelier, Vermont

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Abstract

Book-length works of non-fiction prose are seldom the object of study when we are engaged in practicing our profession, whether as teachers, rhetoricians, or theorists. Phyllis Frus McCord proposes that our goal should be "to break down the hard line between literature . . . and nonliterary texts." I suggest that one way of doing this breaking down is by analyzing non-fiction prose by explicating such elements as character and image. In Tracy Kidder's House the interaction between character and image moves us from the world of the actual to the mythic, imaginative world of archetypal symbols, the shaping principle of this literary work. The house functions as symbol in the meaning it assumes for each individual: traditions, control, status, new beginnings, making a mark, rebellion, good-will, artistic, aesthetic, and accomplishment. The house functions as symbol in what it means as the representation, on a more universal level, of the notion on continuity: homeownership, orientation, art, rituals, celebration and ceremony, and the spiritual flow of creativity.

We seldom study book-length works of nonfiction prose when we are engaged in practicing our profession, whether as teachers, rhetoricians, or theorists. Widely regarded as nonliterary, such works are perceived as based on reality, rather than on what we think of as "the creative impulse" embodied in novels, short stories, and poetry. Pointing us in a new direction, Phyllis Frus McCord, in "Reading Nonfiction in Composition Courses: From Theory to Practice," suggests:

> Our goal should be to break down the hard line between literature, . . . which we regard as created fictions, and nonliterary texts . . . --which we think of as records of 'actuality,' so that we may apply 'to nonfiction the analytical tools we use to uncover the secrets of 'literary art.'" (748)

I suggest that one way "to break down" this hard line is interpreting contemporary nonfiction prose works of serious purpose, those that teach, move, and delight, with the elements of analysis traditionally involved in explication. Two of these elements, character and symbol, bear particularly on interpretation of Tracy Kidder's House. William R. Schroeder, in "A Teachable Theory of Interpretation," says "a text may elaborate a psychology . . . through its presentation of the

characters" (18). And The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics defines symbol as "a manner of representation in which what is shown (normally something material) means, by virtue of association, something more or something else (normally something immaterial)" (833). When a literal interpretation of anything "fails to do it justice" (Preminger 834), it becomes symbolic. What is shown gains "significance through repetition [and] by occupying a pivotal role in the narrative" (Schroeder 18). In House, the interaction of characters with the house moves us from the world of the actual to the mythic, imaginative world of archetypal symbols, the shaping principle of this literary work.

Tracy Kidder details the process of building Jonathan and Judith Souweine's house in Amhurst, Massachusetts in his book. The house was designed by William Rawn and built by Apple Corps Builders. Architectural works, which we can consider art, are, according to Carl Jung, open to interpretation, from the standpoint of both individual psychology and the collective. Though this account does tell us the physical process of house building, it also goes much deeper by developing its symbolic meaning. Kidder develops the symbolic meaning of the house on these levels; first, the house comes to mean to the individuals involved the material projection of inner, psychological forces, and secondly, it means the representation, on a more universal level, the notion of continuity.

First, the house functions symbolically in the meaning it assumes for each individual. Its value relates intimately to

each person's memory of childhood, his/her relationship with the father figure, and his/her position in the world.

The house symbolizes for Jonathan and Judith Souweine many respected traditions derived from Judith's background. Though Jonathan grew up in a "subdivision . . . split-level" (14), he appreciates the graciousness of Judith's family home, a "large and stylish house, a beautiful Colonial" (13-14). From these experiences, they "knew what they wanted in a house" (12). It should fit their active and "busy social, civic, working, sporting life." It should have a sense of style rather than being "just a big box" (13). Bill Rawn's Greek Revival design satisfied their feeling for tradition. The house takes on the symbolic value of control and of adulthood. For instance, Jonathan adopts Judith's ongoing banter with her father in which she quips, "My house, my rules," when he tells Jules, "My house, my songs" (312). In this statement, Jonathan asserts himself in his relation with the father figure; in this case, a father-in law, but nevertheless, a powerful and influential one since Jonathan was seventeen years old.

The house as the seat of control associates closely with the idea of status in the larger world. From the first planning stage, Jonathan and Judith thought the house should not "display their bank account" (13). After the framing was completed, Judith said, "It feels really big to me." By the time it had "risen above some treetops" (167), and "the roof was framed and decked with plywood" and ready for the cornice (284-85), the Souweines began "to worry that the design of their house ha[d]

grown excessively distinctive." Jonathan then drew the line: 'Enough is enough. It has a taste of a Greek temple. Fine. But it's not a Greek temple, and we're not Greeks" (187). Even on moving day, Jonathan is still worrying about the impression the house would make. When he sees the new lamppost out front, "a large coach-style lamp of gleaming copper," he says, "It's a bit much, don't you think? . . . I tell you sometimes I feel that way about the whole house" (307-8). Judith, however, is delighted, for instance, with the "vista through French doors from one end of the house to the other" (313), and she tells her mother that "this house would be just like the one in which she had been raised." Jonathan interprets this to mean "just like that one in spirit" (314). He approves of that feeling as a "fine way for a daughter to feel toward her parents" (314). Later he says, "I am proud that I live in this house" (322).

The house symbolizes a new beginning for the architect, Bill Rawn, who came to architecture in a round about way. As a child in a "well to do family," he loved to draw, but gave it up at age thirteen because his family frowned on it (16). He became a lawyer, quit that and took up printmaking and enjoyed its "symmetry and order [as] expressions of architectural values, of tidiness, security, and comfort" (18-19). He went to architecture school, worked for Davis, Brody, but "wanted to be the designer in control" (20). Because he now has control, Bill wants the house to be perfect in all details. For instance, when the frieze doesn't come "out a couple of inches from the face of the house, . . . he groans 'Ohhhhhh,' like someone

desperate for a bed" (192). Every "tiny detail [is] exceedingly important" (216), but when he sees the fireplace, which had not been constructed according to his plan, he says, "It's not a matter of ego, it's a question of quality" (224), and for months, Bill will not give up the idea of pilasters (226). This perfectionism associates with his sense of accomplishment in relation to the attitudes expressed by his family, but there is also the sense that the house represents his status in the world. During its construction, Bill had felt that this house would be "a house he's proud of and can show" (230). Indeed, the house received a prestigious award from the Boston Society of Architects for its excellence (329).

The house symbolizes to the Apple Corps Builders, the culmination of ten years of leaving "their mark on the countryside" (30) and of the "alliance of all the various craftspeople of the valley [in] a new arts and crafts movement" (159). Throughout the book, the conflict between the profit motive and the aesthetic sense of excellence creates problems for the Apple Corps Builders. First, in their negotiations with the Souweines, Apple Corps Builders absorbed $660 to seal the contract (46). Ultimately, they narrowed their profit margin to $3000, by choosing always to take "extra care" (325, 238). Ned says, "What looks well works well," and Richard says, "The right way is the hard way. . . . We're fussing with it a little bit. Well, this deserves being fussed on. It's going to sit here a hundred years, at least" (140). When Jim miters the framing around the hearth, he tosses the first board away and cuts

another so it fits better (145). At the end of the project, Apple Corps Builders realize "they had spent most of the money building just so" (325), because [they] can't do it cobby" (326). As Ned says, "This house is the jewel of Amherst" (298).

The house has symbolic value for each person in Apple Corps Builders. Alex Ghiselin is the first partner to tell Jim to complete the contract with the Souweines to build the house (16). Though Kidder does not delve into Alex's childhood, from his graduating from Dartmouth, his career as a journalist, his interest in political campaigns (128), reading, and geology (263), we can infer his family which would not expect him to become a carpenter-farmer. He gently rebels against the social hierarchy which demeans farming and carpentry. So in his perfectionism, Alex validates himself in the world that does not value working with one's hands. He meticulously "cuts lumber quickly and to within a thirty-second of an inch of the specified length" (108). Such accuracy is almost the measurement of grains of sawdust. When the house is "framed to the thirty-second of an inch, right to the ridge," Alex says, "That should be good enough" (172), meaning that the work is as perfect as it can be. Later he says, "That there is a suitable house for an important person" (175). For Alex, the house stands, materially and representationally, as his contribution to the elegance of craftsmanship.

To Ned Krutsky, the symbolic value of the house is its opposition to the "assembly line approach to building" (136), which "cobbed" up the work and deadened the spirit. Ned's

school and college background and abilities offered him little but work with his hands. Ned's father abused him, never encouraged him "to learn carpentry. [He] never had a tool kit, never had a hammer" (152), but several times, "he ended up in jobs that had to do with trees, in orchard work or forestry or building" (155). Though he was taught excellent craftsmanship by his brother, he also had the example of his father who was an "incredible, uncompromising builder." Ned says that "he was crazy. If something wasn't just the way he wanted it, he would throw away a thousand dollars just to fix it" (151). Thus when he was asked to join Apple Corps, he did because he "liked their looks. They practiced principled carpentry" (156). In Ned's appraisal of the house after the roofing is complete are echoes of a plea to a dead father: "See what I have done. Appreciate me!" Ned says, "This is a big, big house. I like it, . . . A proud building" (176). And finally, the house represents to Ned the sense of "good will" in the business community, status, in other words. He says to Richard, "Good will at the end is worth some money. We are horrible businesspeople. But, by God, we can build a house!" (327).

To Richard Gougeon, the symbolic value of the house is that it evidences his position in the artistic hierarchy. Foremost among those artists is his perfectionist father, a hard working farmer, lumberjack, and "repairer of equipment--trucks, tractors, balers, . . . well known to the farmers left in the hills [as] a man to be relied upon, [who] can fix almost anything cheaply and well" (27). As a boy, Richard felt "very

proud when he overheard a hilltown tradesman describe his father as an artist with the welding rod." And like Ned's father, he too would do his work over until it was right (93).

Among his blessings, Richard counts "the praise of many former customers" (98), and he plans to "go and look at jobs [he] did" (100) when he retires. Though Richard is practical in his work methods, he recognizes that "the right way is the hard way" (140). After Ned hangs the roof tree, Richard says, "This going to be one stately-looking house. . . . This is neat, . . . I never thought I'd get a chance to build a house with all the stuff this one's going to have on it. It's like building a thirty-two Ford, you know?" (175). With this comment, Richard aligns himself with his father's abilities. Later Richard comments, "I don't think I realized what I was building till now. That thing is right. To the very top. Dead on. We fussed with it. That sucker's going to be nice" (176). Later, after they install the pilasters, Richard aligns himself with the community of carpenters when he says, "We got the old-timers grinnin' in their graves now" (227). Richard's happiness with his achievements is evident when he poses for the camera at Susan's: "This is my best pose right here, . . . when I'm swingin' my hammer" (327).

To Jim Locke, the symbolic value of the house is also that of "a new beginning" (38). Jim's background is "very upper middle class" (4), and both of his parents were Phi Beta Kappas. His father, "an eminent lawyer, [who is] number one in workmen's comp, wrote the book . . . Massachusetts Practice:

Volume 29" (24, 44). Jim "want[s] to be successful" (38), but only on his own terms, not his father's. He is "proud of Apple Corp's accomplishments" (30), and he thinks "being a carpenter is kind of honorable too" (31). Richard thinks Jim "likes talking to well-educated people and he wants to be accepted by them" (31), and Ned thinks Jim "needs to find a more lucrative approach to life" (163). Nevertheless, aesthetics and craftsmanship are Jim's primary motivation. Jim wants to "dress up the chimney" (201) and picks "the more elaborate diagram" which costs more (204). He has Ned install windowsills and doesn't "even ask for recompense" (237). About the stairs, Jim says, "Tight fits are what matter. Some people don't feel that way about life at all, but I know what quality feels like to me. What quality means to me is how tightly things fit together. . . . I want it absolutely right" (268). He comments that "a lot of people would be more comfortable with us if we worked purely for the profit motive" (143). Several times, Jim suggests design details, though he knows he cannot be an architect: "I can't do it. I can't conceive the grace of line, starting from nothing" (184). But he thinks that "the practical person who works with his hands" should receive equal recognition with the architect and owners (184).

Jim's desire for excellence validates his choice of career, that of builder and carpenter, and it gives it value. Thus when "he shows the house to his father, he knows he meant to say to him, 'Here's something I've accomplished in the world'" (276). When his father does not like the design, but likes the

workmanship, Jim is disappointed: "I know what we're doing is good, but I want people to like it" (277). Jim continues to worry about his father and "to wonder why [he] disliked the design" (294). At the end, Jim understands his sense of values: "I've really been thinking about the issue of the art versus income. I guess I realized this summer that I'm not willing to trade it. The art" (299). For Jim, then, the house is "the reconciliation of his visions of what he might have been and what he is and what he could become" (259). For this reason, Jonathan's praise of the house touches Jim emotionally: "he has tears in his eyes when he hangs up" (316).

Thus we see that the house symbolizes for each person both resolution of personal psychological conflicts with the father and establishment of social and professional status.

Secondly, the house symbolically means, on a more universal level, the notion of continuity. The house symbolizes the continuity of homeownership which Kidder tells us has been the standard since early American times. For instance, in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rural New England, as many as ninety percent of all families owned their own homes. Though this percentage rose and fell according to the economic conditions between those early years and the present, approximately sixty-four percent of Americans owned their own homes in 1983, meaning that Americans "were among the best-housed people in the world" (118). By dreaming of and building their ideal house, the Souweines continue the homeownership tradition.

The house symbolizes the continuity of the notion of orientation. The site of the Souweines' house is on the "Southern outskirts of Amhurst, Massachusetts" (3) located on a portion of Judith's parent's property (6). It has "pretty views" (4), of which the "dominant vista . . . lay to the north" with woods and pasture to the south, and to the east and northeast, a view out over Bay Road toward the Pelham Hills (53). The final orientation of the house, carefully worked out by Bill Rawn, places the house slightly off the "east-west axis" with one "long side of the house to the south, the narrow ends facing east and west, with the front door toward the east" (54). These directions of orientation figure importantly in "rites and ceremonies all over the world, particularly in those to do with the founding of temples . . ." (Cirlot 245). For instance, Greek temples, which this house resembles, were usually oriented toward the east. "Since it is the point where the sun rises, [the east] symbolizes illumination and the fount of life; to turn towards the east is to turn in spirit towards this spiritual focal point of light" (Cirlot 245). For the Souweines, an eastern orientation of the front door represents not only the "fount of life," it is also literally true. Judith's parents live in their "dormered Cape, to the east" (54). However, "not all orientations take the east as their point of reference: there is an alternative point in the geography of the sky, symbolic of the 'hole' is space-time and of the 'unmoved mover'--that is the North Star." For instance, the "Etruscans located the abode of the gods in the north, and

hence their soothsayers, when about to speak, would turn to face the south -" thus identifying themselves, "ideologically, with the gods" (Cirlot 245). The Souweines planned for "sunlight" and wanted "lots of windows" that faced south in order to take advantage of solar energy (53). Hence, facing south serves two purposes: practical as well as mythic and representational. Further, "to face the north is to pose a question" and that "to turn westwards is to prepare to die, because it is in the watery deeps of the west that the sun ends its journey" (Cirlot 245). The Souweines end each day's journey in the west, for their bedroom is on the west end near the woods. Then too, the west end of the house is the furthest distance from the "fount of life," Judith's parents, suggesting a journey in time as well as in space. Though symbolic meanings of orientation are well known, it is not clear that Bill Rawn was planning the ideal. However, the final position of the house is so nearly perfect, he may have subconsciously followed the influence of ideal symbolic meanings.

The house also symbolizes the continuity of the art of carpentry. Jim thinks, "It's a great feeling to realize you know as much as most people about something. . . . we're doing fine with the carpentry. What we admire, what we emulate, are things done a long time ago. We're not trying to break new ground, but we're trying to get good enough so we can emulate the masters of a hundred years ago" (138). The Apple Corps Builders were known for their careful work. For instance, Jim does that little extra step to satisfy his drive for

perfection. In one instance, he noticed a spot in the framing where two beams did not quite come together. Even though the little gap made no difference structurally, and it eventually would be covered with plasterboard, he cut a small block of wood and fit it snugly in the gap. "The house had a hole in it, . . . and if he had left it behind all covered up, it would have troubled him," he explains (222). And Jim emulates the masters in continuing the custom of leaving notes concealed in the work. For instance, just as William W. Rose left a sealed can containing a message above a porch ceiling on November 25th, 1840, saying he was the builder, Jim Locke writes a "letter to the future" on a scrap of crown molding: "This House Built / for Jonathan and Judith / Souweine / May-Sept. 1983 / By Apple Corps / Builders /Apple Valley / Ashfield, Mass. / For $146,000 By: / Alex Ghiselin / Richard Gougeon / Edward Krutsky / Jim Locke / June 18, 1983" (140-41).

The house symbolizes the continuity of rituals of house building and celebration. Rather than elaborate rituals of former times, the beginning of this house is honored by witnesses interested in the simple workmanlike ground breaking: the owners, Jonathan and Judith Souweine, the architect, Bill Rawn, the builder, Jim Locke, and Judith's father. Rather than involving lamps, sacrifices, and shadows, this ground breaking involves watching for thoughtful, silent moments as the bulldozer piles up earth (5). After completing the roof framing, the Apple Corps Builders follow the traditional ritual of "endow[ing] the frame with a roof tree." Richard says, "We

do it because someone else did it before us." Ned says, "My idea is you always try to get a tree that's as close to the material you're using as you can find. I've always interpreted it as homage to the trees" (174). Kidder, however, infers from James Frazer's Golden Bough that the ritual "was meant to soothe the gods in trees" (173).

Rituals of celebration of a new house are continued, in this case, with one as old as the book of Deuteronomy. The ceremonial dedication in Jewish tradition involves the symbolic gifts of salt, bread, and candles:

> The salt hearkens back to sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. Sprinkled on bread, salt also recalls what God said to Adam when He expelled him from Paradise: 'By the sweat of thy brow shall thou get bread to eat.' The bread symbolizes the hope that there will always be enough to eat in the new household. Candles say that light and joy should prevail inside the house's walls (315).

Further, the ritual includes Jules leading Sabbath prayers in Hebrew: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, Ruler of the Universe, Who has sanctified us by Thy commandments and commanded us to kindle the Sabbath light. . . . Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and enabled us to reach this occasion" (315).

On another level, the house symbolizes continuity of an art form. The Souweines had several ideas they wanted to incorporate into the design of their house: "arched windows," a

historic feeling," a long wall with windows that faced south," "an unmistakable front door," and a "porch" (52-53, 61). Bill Rawn comments that the house "wants to be . . . Greek Revival" which establishes also the continuity from the age of the classical Greeks, through the age of Andrew Jackson, in which Greek Revival was popular, to the present age that still retained that style in historic buildings in Amherst. Indeed, Bill Rawn, the "contextualist," feels "blessed" that the house "fits in . . . in a symbolic way" (58-60). Moreover, the Greek Revival design itself incorporates mythic and archetypal features. Pilasters, used instead of columns, suggest a temple.

> A temple is seen as an image of the celestial temple and its basic structure is determined by considerations of order and orientation. . . . Solomon's temple was a figurative representation of the cosmos, [and] the holy table [within] represented the terrestrial order. (Cirlot 332-333)

Since the temple "is the house or abode of God, [it is] identifie[d] with reason" (Cirlot 335). Bill Rawn says "front doorways mattered [and] the moldings around them should suggest columns" (57). In temple ornamentation, "the facade is nearly always treated as if it were an alter-piece" (Cirlot 85), and "in a cosmic sense, the two pillars or columns are symbolic of eternal stability, and the space between them is the entrance to eternity. They also allude to Solomon's temple (the image of the absolute and essential principles of building)." If thought

of as a pair, columns represent "the balanced tension of opposing forces." If thought of as "separate symbols, . . . the first unit corresponds to the masculine, affirmative and evolutive principle, whereas the second represents the feminine, negative, passive or involutive." Columns suggest other dualities: "evolution and involution," "good and evil (comparable with the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death--or Knowledge--in the Garden of Eden) . . . [and] Mercy and Severity in the Hebrew tradition" (Cirlot 60).

Jonathan and Judith Souweine insisted that the design of their house include a "porch" in order to add "informality" (61), but in the language of symbols, a porch is associated with the threshold and is used mainly to give it "a special significance" through its "elaboration and enrichment." "The threshold itself is a symbol of transition and transcendence;" that is, it symbolizes "both the reconciliation and the separation of the two worlds of the profane and the sacred" (Cirlot 341). For the narrow gabled end, Bill Rawn carefully designs a pediment and two sloping sides of the roof to make a triangle (57). A triangle "in its highest sense concerns the Trinity, . . . the aspiration of all things towards the higher unity--the urge to escape from extension (signified by the base) into non-extension (the apex) or towards the Origin or the Irradiating Point" (Cirlot 351). Additionally, the triangle, in the "geometrical symbolism of the cosmos, [relates] to fire and to the urge towards ascension inherent in human nature. Hence, the triangle also signifies the communication between earth (the

material world) and heaven (the spiritual world)" (16).

A house itself has traditionally been considered the "feminine aspect of the universe" and the house as a home "arouses strong, spontaneous associations with the human body and human thought (or life, in other words), as has been confirmed empirically by psychoanalysts" (Cirlot 153). This interpretation by psychoanalysts suggests that "every building is seen as a human body (doors and windows--openings; pillars--forces) or spirit (cellars--subconscious; attics--mind, imagination" (18). Ania Teillard says that in

> dreams, we employ the image of the house as a representation of the different layers of the psyche. The outside . . . signifies the outward appearance of Man: his personality or his mask. The various floors are related to the vertical and spatial symbols. The roof and upper floor correspond to the head and the mind, as well as to the conscious exercise of self-control. Similarly, the basement corresponds to the unconscious and the instincts. . . . The kitchen, since this is where foodstuff is transformed, sometimes signifies the place or the moment of psychic transmutation. . . . The inter-communicating rooms speak for themselves. The stairs . . . link . . . the various planes of the psyche, but their particular significance depends upon whether they are seen as ascending or descending. Finally, there is, . . . the association of the house

with the human body, especially regarding its openings. (qtd. in Cirlot 153)

As a work of art, then the symbolic value of the house is its evoking an almost ageless continuity ranging from the practical, personal, and social, to mythic and archetypal meanings. In House, Tracy Kidder studies the psychology of characters who act, react, and interact, either individually or in concert, in response to a pivotal concrete symbol. In addition to evoking psychological and archetypal forces, the house inspires the spiritual flow of creative artistry. And as "literary" nonfiction, House, the book, is imbued with delightful artistry, for it gladdens the heart.

Endnotes

Tracy Kidder, House (New York, Avon, 1985). All references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

J. E. Cirlot, A Dictionary of Symbols (New York, Philosophical Library, 1983). All references to this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

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