

*Eva-Jo Jylhä*

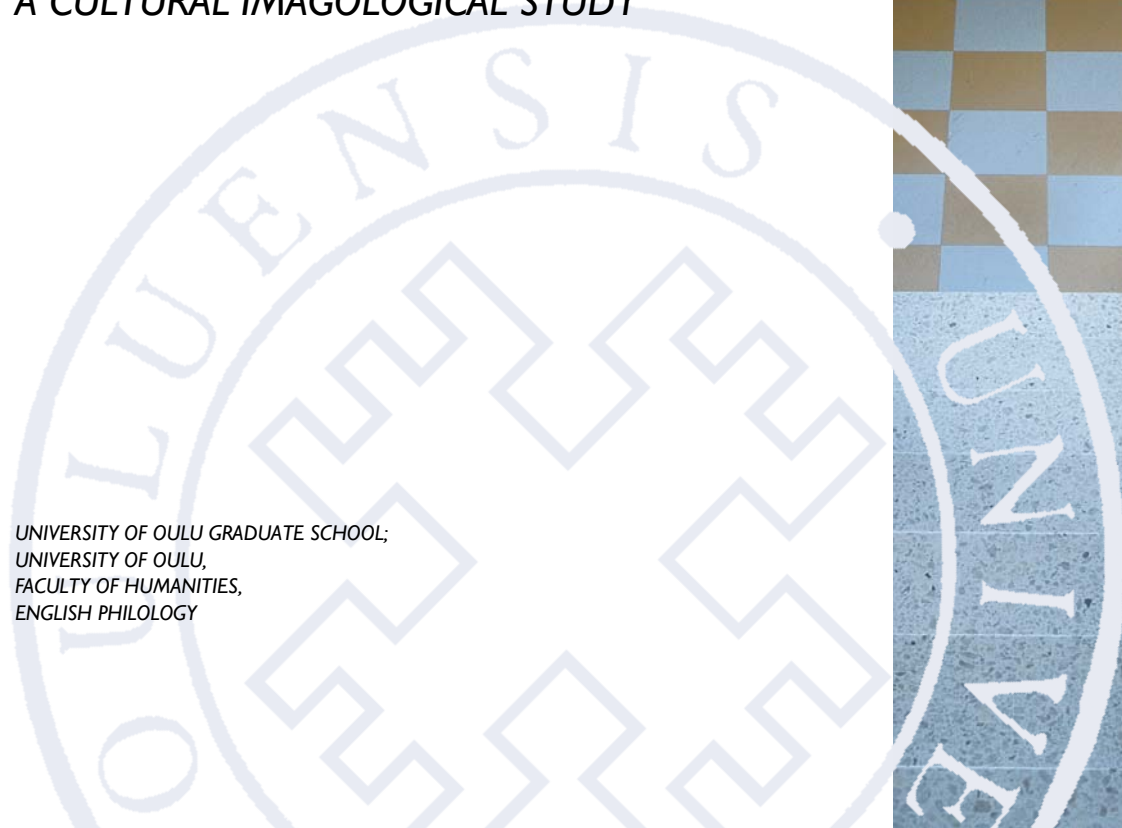
THE CREATION OF  
THE SMALL NEW ENGLAND  
TOWN IN ALICE HOFFMAN'S  
MASSACHUSETTS NOVELS

*A CULTURAL IMAGOLOGICAL STUDY*

UNIVERSITY OF OULU GRADUATE SCHOOL;  
UNIVERSITY OF OULU,  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES,  
ENGLISH PHILOLOGY

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*EVA-JO JYLHÄ*

**THE CREATION OF THE SMALL  
NEW ENGLAND TOWN IN ALICE  
HOFFMAN'S MASSACHUSETTS  
NOVELS**

A cultural imagological study

Academic dissertation to be presented with the assent of  
the Doctoral Training Committee of Human Sciences of  
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(YB210), Linnanmaa, on 7 November 2014, at 12 noon

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University of Oulu Graduate School; University of Oulu, Faculty of Humanities, English Philology

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University of Oulu, P.O. Box 8000, FI-90014 University of Oulu, Finland

***Abstract***

The region of New England has played a strong role in the formation and development of the United States on both physical and ideological levels, and the image of the small New England town is highly evocative at both a regional and national level. It is an image shaped by an awareness of the past and the needs of the time. Alice Hoffman is a popular writer who often writes about people living in small New England towns. This thesis is a study of how Hoffman's fictional small New England towns are created in six of her Massachusetts novels, *Practical Magic* (1995), *The River King* (2000), *Blue Diary* (2001), *The Probable Future* (2003), *Blackbird House* (2004) and *The Red Garden* (2011).

To provide a framework for this study, concepts developed by cultural geographers such as sense of place and landscape are combined with imagological, sociological and historical ideas of collective memory and narrative identity. Phenomenology is at the root of the epistemological stance and concepts that are central to this study of the creation of place. Concepts of place, time and identity from across disciplines are combined in an extension of the horizons of imagology that shifts focus from national images to a broader range of images producing a cultural imagological study of the creation of Hoffman country.

This study works with various levels of engagement and interaction with community in the fictional towns of the novels. The major sub-communities in *The River King* are used to amplify the workings of a sense of place and nostalgia in relation to rootedness. The town community as a whole is studied through *Blackbird House* and *The Red Garden* to explore how history and memory merge to create the mythology central to the identity of a town. Changing interactions with community at an individual level are scrutinized through a topobiographical study of the reconstruction of narrative identity in the novels *Practical Magic* and *Blue Diary*. *The Probable Future* figures around the interaction of a family with the rest of the community and this changing interaction is examined through the processes and functions of memorialization. All six novelistic towns are then examined in terms of landscape and imagined communities. Through the study, a mapping of Hoffman Country emerges and the formation of Hoffman's imagined small New England towns is explicated.

**Keywords:** belonging, collective memory, community, cultural landscape, images, memorialization, narrative identity, New England, sense of place



## **Jylhä, Eva-Jo, Uusienglantilaisien pikkukaupunkien rakentuminen Alice Hoffmannin Massachusettsiin sijoittuvissa teoksissa. Kulttuuri-imagologinen tutkimus miljöistä ja yhteisöistä**

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### ***Tiivistelmä***

Uuden-Englannin alue on ollut merkittävä Yhdysvaltojen alueellisessa ja ideologisessa muodostumisessa. Mielikuvat pienistä uusienglantilaisista kaupungeista miljöinä ovat voimakkaita, ja usein niihin liittyy tietoa paikkojen historiasta.

Alice Hoffmann on suosittu nykykirjailija, jonka useissa teoksissa henkilöahmot asuvat Uuden-Englannin pikkukaupungeissa. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena on tarkastella, miten Hoffman rakentaa fiktiivisiä kaupunkeja kuudessa Massachusettsiin sijoittuvassa teoksessaan. Tutkimusaineistona ovat teokset *Practical Magic* (1995, suom. Noitasisaret), *The River King* (2000), *Blue Diary* (2001), *The Probable Future* (2003), *Blackbird House* (2004) ja *The Red Garden* (2011, suom. Punainen puutarha).

Tässä tutkimuksessa kulttuurimaantieteellisiä käsitteitä, kuten paikkatunne (sense of place) ja maisema, on yhdistetty imagologian, sosiologian ja historian käsitteisiin kollektiivisesta muistista ja narratiivisesta identiteetistä. Näin kulttuuri-imagologia yhdistää imagologian tutkimuksen kansallisuuteen liittyvät mielikuvat mielikuviin tietystä paikasta, ajasta ja identiteetistä. Tätä teoreettista kehystä käytetään analysoitaessa Hoffmannin fiktiivisiä pienkaupunkiyhteisöjä. Tutkimuksen tietoteoreettisena perustana on fenomenologinen näkemys ja käsitteistö. Kulttuuri-imagologian kautta tarkastellaan Hoffmannin romaaneissaan rakentamia yhteisöjä ja miljöitä.

Olenaisimmat yhteisöt romaanissa *The River King* vahvistavat paikan ymmärryksen ja nostalgisuuden merkityksen henkilöahmojen kokemalle juurettomuudelle. Kaupunkiyhteisöjä on tarkasteltu novellikokoelmien *Blackbird House* ja *The Red Garden* avulla osoittamaan, miten historia ja muisti toimivat rakentaen mytologista paikan identiteettiä. Yksilöiden toisistaan erottuva yhteisöllinen vuorovaikutus analysoidaan topobiografisella tavalla rekonstruoitaessa narratiivista identiteettiä romaaneissa *Practical Magic* ja *Blue Diary*. *The Probable Future* -teoksen hahmojen vuorovaikutus perheen sisällä ja muun yhteisön kanssa ilmentää muistelmallisuuden prosessia. Kaikkia kuutta fiktiivistä kaupunkia tarkastellaan maiseman ja fiktiivisen yhteisöllisyyden näkökulmista.

Tämä tutkimus osoittaa Alice Hoffmannin uusienglantilaisiin pikkukaupunkeihin sijoittuvien teosten analyysin avulla, miten kirjailijat voivat käyttää ja muokata teoksissaan mielikuvia paikoista luodessaan tunnesiteitä yksilöiden, yhteisöjen ja miljöiden välille.

*Asiasanat:* kollektiivinen muisti, kulttuurimaisema, mielikuva, muistelmallisuus, narratiivinen identiteetti, paikkatunne, Uusi-Englanti, yhteisöllisyys





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Oulu, August 28th, 2014

*Eva-Jo Jylhä*

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# 1 Introduction

Broadly speaking, this thesis offers an interdisciplinary study of the creation of place in literature. More specifically, it examines ways in which Alice Hoffman, an author with a powerful and evocative sense of place, conceptualizes the small New England town with complementary vivid portraits of communities in six of her Massachusetts novels. These novels, *Practical Magic* (1995); *The River King* (2000); *Blue Diary* (2001); *The Probable Future* (2003); *Blackbird House* (2004); *The Red Garden* (2011) have been selected for investigation because of how place figures in them. Weaving together concepts and strands of thinking primarily from the fields of cultural geography, history, sociology and more traditional literary studies, a strain of cultural imagology is developed to enable an examination of how fictitious towns set in a preexisting historical context are created in literature. In her small New England towns Hoffman draws on a popular American icon that has figured strongly in the nation's imagination:

Well before small-town Yankee New England came to lose its imaginative hold as the spiritual heart of America, New England in a broader sense had become inextricably linked to the national culture. ... New England writers defined the national cultural tradition. (Nissenbaum 1996: 40)

Hoffman's texts arise from this tradition and reaffirm the importance of the small town in terms of community and belonging. The novelist integrates an awareness of history and the significance of place and belonging into her multi-generational stories as she writes of relationships and the emotions that bind and sever them. Her creation of small New England towns is of interest for reasons such as the imaginative place New England as a region has in the nation and the role of community in an ever changing world.

Often called the cradle of the nation, New England "has long had a profound cultural influence on the remainder of the United States" (Wood 1997: 155). This imaginative hold is historically rooted in popular conceptions of both the colonial period and the birth of the nation. It is predicated on an understanding of the past that has been shaped through the narratives of the region and the nation and entered into its collective memory. It has been reinforced through education and commemoration with the weight of power and tradition giving it ballast. For as Peirce Lewis puts it "Ever since the United States gained its independence, political and economic power have tended to concentrate in the northeastern corner of the country" (1990: 80). This corner of the country, New England, is of

particular interest in terms of place because of both the political and economic hold it has on the country as well as the imaginative place it has in the nation. In the six novels studied, Hoffman draws on elements of New England's imaginative hold as she creates her fictional small towns.

## 1.1 Positionings

In this study place is viewed as space that has become meaningful through human attachment. "When humans invest meaning in a portion of space and then become attached to it in some way ... it becomes a place" (Cresswell 2004: 10). The meanings given to a spatial area can be both individual and societal, but as the area is assigned particular meanings it becomes place. Entrikin (1991) writes that "[s]pecific place refers to the conceptual fusion of space and experience that gives areas of the earth's surface a 'wholeness' or an 'individuality'" (6). This sense of wholeness and individuality is true of place on a range of scales from the global to the discrete locale. Paasi (1996) asserts that at a regional level the meaning of place emerges from a complex interweaving of practices and interactions:

It is through the institutionalisation process and its inherent struggles that the territorial units in question construct their boundaries, their symbols and their specific forms of identity which distinguish them from other territories. (99)

Thus, regions as place form identity through institutions, boundaries and symbols at both material and abstract levels making a region "a set of cultural relations between a specific group and a particular place; [region] is a people-bound category" (ibid. 95). The implication of this understanding of region is that it is actively produced and a continuous process. Thus, in this study, New England and its imaginative formation becomes significant in terms of spatial positioning.

Other questions of positioning must also be addressed in order to engage in a study of the creation of Alice Hoffman's communities; the interaction of reader, author and text is inevitably informed by experience as well as theoretical grounding. Lotman (1990) draws attention to the active process of the interaction between a text and its reader when he writes:

A text and its readership are in a relationship of mutual activation: a text strives to make its readers conform to itself, to force on them its own system of codes, and the readers respond in the same way. The text as it were



contains an image of its 'own' ideal readership, and the readership one of its 'own' text. (63)

As a reader, my responses to Hoffman's novels are informed by my experiences and my studies. There is a danger that I, accordingly, may become a myopic reader, allowing my focus on specific aspects of the texts to lend them a larger proportion of significance than is their due. However, Lotman also indicates that the text plays an active role in the reading process and can serve as a corrective, preventing the reader from distorting the text beyond its limits. Thus it can be argued that

The image of the ideal reader actively affects the actual readers, making them into its likeness... On its side too, the readership image, since it is not explicit but merely inherent to the text as a potential position, is also subject to variation. As a result between text and readership there is a complex game of positions. (Lotman 1990: 64)

As researcher, my positioning as reader is rooted in both personal experience of place and a theoretical framework.

The author, as the creator of the text, figures strongly in the formation of the readership image. It is she who has created the system of codes within the text and these codes are equally influenced by her experiences and thinking. Hence both the position of the researcher and the position of the author of the novels require some explication in terms of how these positionings inform the novels produced and the ways in which they are examined in this study. In an exposition of the complexities of fiction Pocock (1981) writes:

Associated with the universality of fictive reality is its inexhaustible character. Literary revelation, as opposed to reporting, is implicit, suggestive. This is so because the reader is no neutral receiver, but is also a creative, interpretive being. Both author and reader have their own unique biographical history and general social or cultural contexts, including the context of literary criticism, itself a reflexive influence. (11)

The biographical history of both author and reader is enmeshed in and informed by the social and cultural context of New England.

The rest of this chapter will develop the positionings of my study with respect to place, reader, author and text. Concerning the first of these categories, Enrikin (1991) writes:

Place presents itself to us as a condition of human experience. As agents in the world we are always “in place,” much as we are always “in culture.” For this reason our relations to place and culture become elements in the construction of our individual and collective identities. (1)

Since this statement holds true for both the reader and author, it is necessary to explore relations to place and culture in examining positioning. Because my positioning as reader is influenced both by the years I spent living in New England and the years I have spent in Europe it has become apparent that the ways in which New England is perceived, experienced and understood need to be examined. Thus the representation of the real that is the imaginative formation of New England as a region and particularly its small towns, which are strong symbols of its identity, is developed. The final object of positioning is the texts themselves, Alice Hoffman’s Massachusetts novels. They are the imaginative place where the author and reader meet. They are replete with the codes and images (cf Lotman 1990: 63) that the writer has produced and the reader interacts with. A study of the texts forms the body of this work, but a general introduction to them allows for an initial positioning. A basic summary of their narratives can provide a simplified framework on which critical examination can be built and is found in the appendix to the present study.

## **1.2 New England: “A tidy region”**

In examining the regional geography of the United States it becomes immediately clear that certain cultural landscapes have come to be seen as inherently present in the scenery of particular regions. These cultural landscapes reinforce the apparent naturalism of the region. As Davey (1998) writes “Strong regionalisms develop narratives and figures that imply the geographic inevitability of the cultural manifestations that partly constitute the region” (4). Thus the imaginative construction of regions is the product of a convergence of a multitude of factors including cultural features, historical influences and physical aspects found in both the built environment and the natural environment. Within regions, smaller localities also assume distinct meanings that are integral to both individual and communal identity:

... the meanings given to a place may be so strong that they become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing [it] ... [Identity] refers to lived experiences and all the subjective feelings associated with everyday

consciousness, but it also suggests that such experiences and feelings are embedded in wider sets of social relations. (Rose 1995: 88)

At both the regional and local levels of scale the reading of the landscape is shaped by culturally constructed meanings (Rose 1995: 99; Schama 1995; Daniels & Cosgrove 1988; Wylie 2007). These meanings are integral to the bonds and attachments that contribute to a sense of place (Tuan 1975; Cresswell 2004).

The subjective nature of ‘sense of place’ makes it difficult to quantify or clearly delineate in relation to a specific place yet at many levels it is a shared experience that consists of palimpsestic layerings that are at the core of the imaginative construction of a place and its cultural landscape (Foote & Azaryahu 2009). Thus, the distinctiveness of place at the local and regional level is not only marked by the environment but also by the history of the area and the imaginative reconstruction of it in the present—the formation of heritage (Graham, Ashworthy & Tunbridge 2000).

New England as an American region is a “tidy” one with a relatively long, proud history (Nissenbaum 1996: 38). Its boundaries are clearly delineated by state lines and it has long figured in the imagination as a natural region:

At the same time, of course, New England is not just a physical space, not simply a geographical surface and a bundle of landscapes, but is also an idea, a country of the mind. ... New England is popularly defined by ... a cluster of images, icons, historic episodes, character types: the white village, the steepled church, the Revolution, Puritan times, the Yankee. (Ryden 2001: 204)

Nevertheless, “If its six states do not actually comprise a natural region, the scale of life in most of New England suggests that it is a cultural region—a place where people have etched distinctive patterns into the landscape” (Conforti 2001: 2). This landscape is one that has been created over time, drawing upon images of the region that relate to the combination of the natural environment and the history of the region.

In writing of the formation of regions through a process of institutionalization, Paasi (1991) writes of landscape: “[d]uring institutionalisation, nature is normally transformed from being merely a basis for material production to a more abstract manifestation in the form of *landscape* with a symbolic (aesthetic) role” (244). Paasi divides the process of regional identity formation—its institutionalization—into four stages: the development of

territorial shape, the formation of the symbolic shape, the emergence of institutions and the establishment of the region (1986: 121–122; 1991: 244–247). When understood in this manner region is a “*social and cultural category*” with historical dimensions built into its institutional practices:

It is mediated into daily life and is produced and reproduced in multitudinous social practices through communication and symbols, which can be common to all individuals in a region, though the meanings associated with them will always be construed personally on the basis of specific life situations and biographies. (Paasi 1991: 249)

New England is an established region with a flexible identity grounded in its symbols, institutions and history. Davey (1998) argues that “Far from being a geographical manifestation, a regionalism is a discourse which contains not only narratives and re-written narratives, but also terms and figurations that generate their meanings differentially within it” (4) so that as a discourse regionalism can both restrict meanings created by others such as the nation-state while also being used to resist alternative meanings generated from within. In the case of New England then an exploration of the development of the contemporary cultural landscape must begin with an explication of its institutionalization beginning with the narratives of European settlement of the region.

### **1.2.1 The Creation of New England**

The Americas are clearly a European creation, “an idea constructed by the European imagination” (Turner 1995: 4). In coming to the “new” world the European settlers laid claim to what they viewed as virgin land that was “already promised them in their own mythology, now discovered by their own talent and curiosity” (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 3). The tales of the explorers combined with the ideological needs of the colonizers to create a new world that they had discovered for themselves. This is not to say that it was created out of nothing nor to dismiss the fact that the land the settlers claimed was already inhabited by rich indigenous cultures that, when not outright destroyed, were suppressed and marginalized and have long continued to be so. Indeed, the positioning of the Europeans as Turner (1995) writes “does not excuse or justify the acts, based on [processes of construction], that have had such a profound and devastating impact on native culture and history in the Americas. Europeans made their own new world, for themselves” (5). In the case of New England, first the Pilgrim settlers

and then the Puritans came to the new world to create a society based on religious ideology. Their possession of the land was not just physical but also ideological, imaginatively shaped through language.

New England was given its name by the explorer, Captain John Smith (Kupperman 2001: 721; Nissenbaum 2001: 549), who actively promoted this area of “incredible abundance” (Smith 1616: 23) for settlement in the early 1600s. It was initially settled by a group of Pilgrims from England in 1620 when they were unable to continue travelling to the Virginia territory after landfall in Plymouth Bay (Berkeley 2001: 600; Reps 1965: 115). In the 1630s the Puritan “great migration” brought thousands of settlers to the area under the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company (Cohen 2001: 638; Vance 1990: 209). These English settlers came to a landscape marked by the agricultural practices of Native Americans “unintelligible as those marks may have been to Europeans entering those landscapes for the first time” (Ryden 2001: 35). Plymouth was established on “one of the Indian ‘oldfields,’ [sic] partially cleared and formerly used by one of the tribes for growing corn” (Reps 1965: 115). Similar, open coastal lands cleared for agricultural purposes by the indigenous peoples living there suggested the pastoral promise of England used by Smith and later promoters of settlement to the area (Conforti 2001: 19). The Pilgrims (who due to their separatist ideologies engaged in trade with the Puritans but otherwise did not figure in the region) did settle Plymouth first, but the imaginative formation of the region was that of the Puritan colonizers who came to the Massachusetts area in the 1630s and early 1640s. During that time 21,000 English Puritan colonists moved to the New World, settling in the coastal areas of the region that had been cleared by the Native Americans whose populations had been devastated by European diseases leaving the land conveniently cleared and emptied (Favretti 1982: 325; Conforti 2001: 19). These Protestant colonizers were a fairly homogenous group: middle-class people with a high rate of literacy and education. There was not much in-migration after the early 1640s but the population expanded due to a high birth rate, a low mortality rate and much less remigration (only about a sixth of the population) than in other colonies (Gertsle 1997: 534–6).

As the name of the region implies, ‘New England’ while territorially defined (cf. Paasi 1991: 244) by its charter was envisioned as culturally contiguous with the homeland. It “was not intended to become a *new* world, but instead a new version of an old one” (Lewis 1990: 82). John Smith described it as such when he wrote that settlers

who euer as they are able to subsist of themselues, may beginne the new Townes in *New England* in memory of their olde: which freedome being confined but to the necessity of the generall good, the euent (with Gods helpe) might produce an honest, a noble, and a profitable emulation. (Smith 1616: 32)

This vision of purpose was adopted by the Puritans who came to settle the area. During the first passage to bring the Puritans to New England, John Winthrop, who had been elected governor of the colony, composed and delivered a sermon that illustrated the purpose of the settlement and began the formation of its symbolic shape (cf. Paasi 1991: 245): “For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us” (Winthrop 1838: 47). Because of their religious convictions the Puritans strove to create a ‘new’ England that would embody the New Testament ‘city on a hill’ which could be looked up to as both a physical and moral example. “Both Smith and the Puritan patriarchs of New England beheld the region as what England had been in the beginning: a fertile and wooded land waiting to be transformed by industrious English people into a productive pastoral civilization” (Conforti 2001: 13). For the Puritans, the civilization they strove to create was closely linked with religious ideology. Because Puritan patriarchs saw their colony as an opportunity to leave behind the vices of Europe and embrace the founding image of a ‘city upon a hill,’ New England became a place of moral imagination.

While connections to the Puritans in England were maintained, the country looked back to was an idealized England of the past rather than the corrupt England of the present. As Miller (1956) writes:

The Bay Company ... was an organized task force of Christians, executing a flank attack on the corruptions of Christendom. These Puritans did not flee to America; they went in order to work out that complete reformation which was not yet accomplished in England and Europe, but which would quickly be accomplished if only the saints back there had a working model to guide them. (11)

The model was one that the Puritans were unable to follow in England but the newness of the colony “in a bare land, devoid of already established (and corrupt) institutions, empty of bishops and courtiers” (Miller 1956: 12) was seen as ideal for providing them with the opportunity to create such a model for the world. This connection between the old world and the new is visible in the names given to the

settlements: “What is startling in the American naming of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries is that ‘new’ and ‘old’ were understood synchronically, co-existing within homogeneous, empty time. ... New London *alongside* London: an idiom of sibling competition rather than of inheritance” (Anderson [1983] 1991: 187). Imaginatively, the settlers saw themselves as “living lives *parallel*” (ibid. 188) to those of the Puritans in England. Despite this imaginative parallelism, the ‘errand’ of the first generation would turn into the beginnings of a self-righteous American identity.

In 1607 an attempted settlement in Maine called Sagadahoc had failed: a contingency which had led to the impression that John Smith’s ‘New England’ was a cold, barren, rocky place (Conforti 2001: 14, 24). The Pilgrims’ experience of their first winter when half of the colony died of starvation and the cold (Berkeley 2001: 600) contributed to this image of a harsh New England. The “fertile wooded land” was hotter in summer than England and the winters were characterized as “inhospitable”, but it was believed that “improving the land” would moderate the climate (Conforti 2001: 25). Also, although the coastal area had been cleared by the farming practices of the Native Americans, farther inland all was wilderness—characterized as a “howling desert wilderness” (Johnson 1654) in writings of the time, an image at odds with the promotional material of Smith and others. Even more so than the Pilgrims, the Puritans felt morally bound to tame this wilderness and as new settlements were formed, the colonizers “introduced a new degree of change intent on reproducing on North American soil the physical and biological world left behind” (Ryden 2001: 35). In attempting to enact this change the settlers worked hard to reshape the landscape. Favretti (1982) describes their efforts in condemnatory terms declaring that they “saw little of beauty in the mountains, hills, valleys, streams and forests. Instead they conquered the landscape, using what they could for food and shelter and destroying the rest” (325). The wilderness they encountered not only provided physical obstacles but was also imagined as a place of evil and danger and as such they felt a moral duty to control it. Hence, for the Puritans, “work, improvement and productivity acquired moral status; economic activity became a way of glorifying God” (Conforti 2001: 16). These attempts to take control of the landscape were not only agricultural but also imaginative as they “imposed cultural order on their new physical world by applying familiar geographic terms and classifications [following an] imaginative and cultural imperative to homologize the geography of homeland and colony” (Conforti 2001: 19). The Puritans shaped the landscape both physically and imaginatively in New England.

The Puritans were a well-educated group and through numerous tracts, sermons, correspondence and eventually historical accounts, a “print culture of regional consciousness” (Conforti 2001:12) developed. As power shifted in Reformation England (and the conversion of Native Americans was seen as a reason for the existence of the colony), the 1640s and 50s saw the beginning of an American Puritan identity. As Conforti writes, “Industry and competency undergirded the middle-class English social ideal that writers projected onto New England—a family-based, regional aspiration shaped by Puritan religion” (2001: 21). The first generation had endured the journey across the ocean and the hardships of starting to claim the land for their new England as a physical manifestation of their spiritual quest (Conforti 2001: 47) and the next generation added to this.

The concept of ‘generation’ “enables us to comprehend the relations between life histories and larger-scale social histories” (Paasi 1991: 251). In the case of the colonies with the creation of entirely new communities generational shifts take on particular significance. The second generation of Puritans, while embracing the symbolic shaping of the region begun by their parents, found it necessary to shape their identity in light of the spatial reality of their separation from the Old World. Hence a historicized identity for second generation Puritans was developed and expressed through both the sermons of the Puritan preachers which came to be known as American jeremiads and the captivity narratives that were published at the time. Religious mythology was used both for political purposes and to reinforce the Puritan imperatives of the colony through sermons, particularly jeremiads. These jeremiads of the seventeenth century followed a pattern: “first, a precedent from scripture that sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations that detail the actual state of the community; and finally, a prophetic vision that unveils the good things to come, and so explains away the gap between fact and idea” (Bercovitch 1979: 90). They were similar to European jeremiads but as Bercovitch notes, the rhetoric “posits a movement from promise to experience—from the ideal of community to the facts of community life—and thence forward, with prophetic assurance, toward a resolution that incorporates both fact and ideal” (Bercovitch 1979: 91). Their ritualistic importance in terms of imposing and justifying control through process is evidenced by the fact that “the tradition of opening the annual General Court in May with an election sermon began in Boston in 1634 and continued until 1834” (Elliot 1994: 257). The jeremiads were used to explore the state of the community and their adherence to Puritanism. Samuel Danforth’s election sermon of 1670 entitled *A*



*Brief Recognition of New England's [sic] Errand into the Wilderness* serves as a classic example of the American jeremiad. In his address, Danforth explores the concept of the colony's errand as city on a hill and the physical and moral wilderness they encountered in New England. As he puts it:

You have solemnly professed before God, Angels and Men, that the Cause of your leaving your Country, Kindred and Fathers houses, and transporting your selves with your Wives, Little Ones and Substance over the vast Ocean into this waste and howling Wilderness, was *your Liberty to walk in the Faith of the Gospel with all good Conscience according to the Order of the Gospel, and your enjoyment of the pure Worship of God according to his Institution, without humane Mixtures and Impositions.* (Danforth 1670: 10–1)

The message of Danforth's jeremiad has been interpreted differently by different scholars (Miller 1956; Bercovitch 1979) but the rhetorical trope of errand and wilderness that Danforth develops within the sermon are ones that have maintained a strong grip on the American imagination. Over time, the tone of the jeremiads of men such as Danforth and the Mathers changed but for the second and third generations the jeremiad "was a way of conceiving the inconceivable, of making intelligible order out of the transition from Europe to American experience" (Miller 1953: 31). Through the jeremiad the Puritan leaders used the experiences of the first generation to shape and contain the way in which New England developed. In the process they turned history into a myth that provided a continued sense of purpose. Bercovitch explores the irony of the use of this myth in the jeremiads: "the American jeremiad evokes the mythic past not merely to elicit imitation but above all to demand progress" (1979: 96); thus the ministers ended up draining the errand of theological content and "intent on preserving the past, they transformed it, as legend, into a malleable guide to the future" (Bercovitch 1979: 101). The Puritan myth was transformed into a myth of progress that continues to mold the American imagination.

The influence of the jeremiad was so strong that it permeated texts other than sermons as well. Captivity narratives such as that of Mary Rowlandson complemented the sermons and shaped the identity of the first and second generation Puritans in New England:

Captivity narratives usually follow the jeremiad design, with the victim reflecting upon the period of his or her life preceding the capture and discovering personal faults that had brought on God's punishment. During the

time of captivity, the repentant victim searches within the self and vows to return to earlier piety, a decision that appears to be rewarded when the captive is freed. Mary White Rowlandson's captivity narrative, the first and most famous, can be read as such a jeremiad. (Elliot 1994: 263)

Indeed, Rowlandson's narrative was originally published with a preface by Increase Mather and a sermonic afterward on the war by her husband, minister Joseph Rowlandson, bracketing her text and giving it a holy, communal function (Elliot 1994: 265). Rowlandson's narrative was published in both the colonies and London in 1682 under different titles. The title given in New England, *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, highlighted the Puritan reliance on God and thus emphasized the spiritual journey Rowlandson underwent during her captivity. The London title, *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, a Minister's Wife in New England*, not only drew attention to the captivity itself but also brought in New England specifically. Thus, through the variation in titles both the spiritual and the geographical aspects of the narrative are brought out. In her narrative Rowlandson "evoked the physical landscape of New England in a way that reenacted the founding Puritan errand into the wilderness" (Conforti 2001: 47) and a pattern was set. It was through such narratives that "captivity became a way for members of the second generation such as Rowlandson to acquire heroic status through a physical journey-spiritual pilgrimage that rehearsed the cultural mythology of New England's founding" (ibid.). Thus, the landscape which was now conceived of as a "howling desert" became a New World stage for the heroic drama of the founding fathers and the religious mission of the Puritans. "The Puritan errand into the wilderness signalled a "new theology of place" that buttressed the developing local patriotism of the second generation colonists" (Conforti 2001: 42). Through the historical work of the second generation, not only was the founding of New England turned into an epoch but it was also placed in the forefront of the American past. The third and fourth generations were compelled "to reimagine New England identity in ways that reconciled narratives of the region's heroic religious past with eighteenth century British imperial realities" (Conforti 2001: 36) and reinforced the parallelism (Anderson [1983] 1991) of their society, but the groundwork for an American identity was laid.

The founding myth of the Pilgrims was used by patriots in the 1770s to bolster the revolutionary movement (Cohen 2001: 599) and afterward, the role of

the region in the new nation was augmented through the perception of the Pilgrims as having come to the New World to establish a democratic society. However, as Anderson notes, *The Declaration of Independence* (1776) itself does not make any reference to the Pilgrims “nor are the grounds put forward to justify independence in any way ‘historical’” ([1983] 1991: 193) and as such the revolution to create a nation was new and could even be seen as an attempt “to safeguard their continuing parallelism” (ibid. 191). Thus different generations following the revolution began to look back in history to assist in identity formation. As Paasi (1991) writes, “generations mediate the histories of a region [or nation] and its individuals through institutional practices which have their own logic in various scales of history, that is, individual, institutional, and social” (252). After the establishment of the nation there was a need to create a genealogy for the nation (Anderson [1983] 1991: 195) and the Pilgrims came to be used mythically to mediate the image of both the region and the nation.

Historiography came to be politically loaded and much was written to enhance the status of New England in the new nation. Key examples of how this was done can be found in Jeremy Belknap’s *American Biography* (1794) in which “Belknap devotes one hundred pages to biographies of Plymouth’s leaders” (Conforti 2001: 345) and Jedediah Morse used his geographies to highlight “the story of Plymouth to establish the historical primacy of the region’s republican ways” (Conforti 2001: 178). Both men were also central to the revival of celebrations of Forefathers’ Day, which celebrated the anniversary of the Pilgrim’s landing, and they provided material for orators to draw on:

Most Forefathers’ Day speeches undertook not just to celebrate the Pilgrim’s landing but the entire epic of New England history. The settlement of Plymouth was seen as the first in a providentially appointed series of events leading to the founding of Massachusetts Bay and the other New England colonies. Ordinarily no distinction was made between Pilgrim and Puritan, separatist and nonseparatist. This breadth of scope and glossing over of differences was partly a matter of principle, partly a pragmatic deference to the etiquette of the occasion, whose most basic purpose was ritual affirmation of a corporate New England identity. (Buell 1986: 198)

Daniel Webster’s use of this heritage is exemplary. In a series of speeches given over his career he “used the Pilgrims as rhetorical characters serving immediate needs” and in the process created myths through his speeches that reshaped understanding of the Pilgrims and gave them legendary status (Erickson 1984:

45). Webster did not distinguish between the Pilgrims and Puritans but in speaking of their piety and republicanism “he portrayed all emigrants to Massachusetts as belonging to the same movement, and that movement as one for independence” (Erickson 1984: 49). Thus, the Puritans “were reimagined in ways that acknowledged but often mitigated their intolerance and that stressed their republican kinship with the virtuous, unvarnished founders of Plymouth” (Conforti 2001: 172), leading to the imaginative conflation of the two groups. Not only were their religious differences glossed over but the conflated image began to be secularised as well. Erickson details how as Webster’s career grew and his political needs changed he used and re-shaped the myth to meet the needs of ‘union’ in the face of growing friction over slavery even as the abolitionists made use of the mythical status Webster first created in his 1820 speech *The First Settlement of New England* to oppose slavery and inflame the friction between the different regions of the country. Despite the conflicting representations of the forefathers in terms of slavery, their celebration through orations and festivals was primarily used to reinforce a sense of continuity and tradition for the region:

In addition to the two most fundamental themes of Protestant piety and civil liberty, the orators identified sundry other New England traits that had since become key influences in American society. The most important of these were industry and related qualities (thrift, common sense, practicality, adaptability) and the comprehensive commitment to education. (Buell 1986: 199)

These New England traits were viewed as the natural secular outgrowth of the original religious errand of the Puritans. This is the imaginative image of New England Hoffman draws upon in her writing, the “filiopietistic mythography” (Buell 1986: 197) that endures, a series of traits that highlight the strengths of the region and hold New England up as both standard and exemplar for the nation.

### **1.2.2 New England Towns**

As dominant as the founding narratives are within the identity of the region, the central image of New England is that of the small New England town—the white village. As Nissenbaum (1996) writes, “The idea of a centrally arranged, or nucleated, New England village, with its collection of neat white houses facing a central ‘common,’ or ‘green,’ is one that is dear to both the American public and academic historians” (44). Yet “the stately homes, the neat town commons, the

orderly landscape of stone walls and picket fences, the churchly edifices that replaced primitive Puritan meetinghouses—these familiar elements of village iconography only coalesced over time” (Conforti 2001: 124). Indeed, although the nucleated, small New England town as white village did not become an actual part of the landscape until the late 18th and early 19th centuries (Conforti 2001: 128) its enduring appeal remains even today feeding a nostalgia industry into which Hoffman readily taps.

The conventional view of New England towns is one of nucleation as can be seen in Reps’s (1965) description of townships that were formed with a nucleated center surrounded by farmed fields with ownership in severalty and in common (120). The idea was that this was done for practical reasons as the first settlers needed close living to survive both the climate and the hostility of the Native Americans while clearing the land and preparing it for farming. However, in the 1970s the nucleated village as settlement form came under scrutiny:

No settlement form would have better insured community forbearance as seventeenth-century colonists ventured into the wilderness of New England. The conventional view that New England’s colonial communities formed compact villages gathered around a central meetinghouse correlates nicely with an idealized social order attributed to hard-bitten, theocratic puritans; with recorded plans for villages; with literary and circumstantial historical reference to villages; with nineteenth-century maps and sketches of villages; and with present-day landscape. ... [However, it] has become evident to some historians that nucleation was not the constant rule for settlement form in early colonial New England. (Wood 1997: 54)

Understandings of community do not necessitate nucleation, and the Puritan leaders did not rely on proximity to control their communities.

Common land usage was a prominent feature of colonial settlement and many fields, pasture lands and woodlands were held in common by the householders of the town, but they were not laid out around a nucleated village.

New England common land takes its character from the cultural baggage of the Englishmen who arrived in the early seventeenth century. Certainly memory played an important part in their creation of agricultural systems based on carefully regulated common land. ... Ecclesiastical pragmatism guided the founders too; a common land system meant that every member of the community would be guided by the will of the community elders, who

could enforce religious conformity by threatening to withdraw rights to common land. (Stilgoe 1982: 9–10)

However, within a few generations as later arrivals had struggled to gain rights to common land there was a shift away from common land agriculture in the towns as “first-comers surrendered their exclusive use [of common land] to all householders” (Stilgoe 1982: 16) and common land became town land.

Vance (1990) argues that not only did the early settlers of New England come to the new world in order to practice religious freedom but they also wanted to escape the feudalist settlement patterns of the old world. Thus, although the settlers brought English patterns of agricultural villages with them (dispersed villages were common in East Anglia, the area of England the majority of the settlers came from (Wood 1997: 54)), there was a shift in the symbolic worth of land. With the moral imperative of glorifying God through endeavour

... there was a strong belief in the productive use of land rather than the possession of land to confer a hierarchical position. ... The puritan idea was that one held land because he could effectively use land, and in philosophical and religious terms he should hold land only to the extent he made that effective use of it. (Vance 1990: 210)

Landholding was thus important for moral and communal reasons. Morally the prerogative was placed on the edifying use of the land while communally it led to a range of privileges and responsibilities that served to keep the Puritans united and in line with the ideological demands of their religion.

Imaginatively, towns were indeed built around the idea of community. “The New England town was conceived not as a geographical thing, as most Americans think of towns, but as a religious and civic community of people” (Lewis 1990: 98). Towns were congregations built around the meetinghouse in that the inhabitants of the town lived within a reasonable distance of church. This meant that the people did not need to live in close physical proximity in order to belong to the community which led to dispersed farmsteads becoming a common pattern of settlement:

Even though farms might be widely dispersed, they were always part of a community. There was no such thing as being outside a town, with its religious, political and economic organization. Distances between farms always were such that a sense of community was maintained. (Vance 1990: 212)

The organizing principles of the towns were ideological and economical and these were central to the community. The colonial New England town “was a network of social and economic linkages, a social web, not a cluster of dwellings” (Wood 1997: 67). Community activity focused on the meetinghouse with its attendant lot or green, but buildings did not come to cluster around it until later.

Villages began to grow around the meetinghouses and their commons in the eighteenth century. The meetinghouse lot came to be used for non-ecclesiastical purposes: militia trained there, enlistment was accepted by town clerks there and monuments honouring the war dead were erected where enlistment had occurred (Stilgoe 1982: 18–20). A parsonage and a farmhouse or two might already have been built near the meetinghouse (Wood 1997: 67) but now buildings such as taverns, general stores and a blacksmith were built to accommodate and serve the farmers who came to meet and worship at the meetinghouse (Stilgoe 1982: 22; Lewis 1990: 98). In the early nineteenth century new industries such as harnessmakers and wheelrights located around the common or green which led to other businesses establishing themselves there as well (Stilgoe 1982: 24). As these businesses attracted customers, other services such as a local newspaper, attorney’s offices and small banks clustered around the common creating central villages within the towns. “Central villages acquired a new purpose and physical appearance; they became commercial hubs with a compact arrangement of houses and businesses owned by professionals and artisans” (Conforti 2001: 129). They were called ‘the center’ not because of the centrality of religion but of business (Stilgoe 1982: 23). These new buildings were often painted white “the tint of wealth” (Conforti 2001: 129) to show the prosperity of the businesses.

The green or meetinghouse lot itself, common town property much reduced from the original commons, was generally unkempt and often “disfigured by the crisscross of oxcart ruts and horse wagon tracks left by outlying villagers as they approached the tavern or meetinghouse” (Conforti 2001: 127) and were made more unsightly by the sheds erected to protect horses during services and meetings.

But by 1840, nostalgia and a new craving for spatial beauty had begun to reshape greens everywhere. The farmers of any town saw the green perhaps once a week, when they arrived to shop and pick up mail; but the villagers saw it every day, and it was they who led the struggle to ‘improve’ the green. Often nostalgic patriotism motivated the villagers, but sometimes it was disgust that prompted their efforts. (Stilgoe 1982: 26)

The towns as a whole were often unwilling to spend money to clear up the meetinghouse lot and other town land that had once been common land, and so the people living in the villages around them created societies to raise the funds to beautify the greens. By the 1870s there were some 200 ‘village improvement societies’ in New England which worked to “improve the green and public land immediately adjacent to the ‘center’ of town” (Stilgoe 1982: 29). The members of the societies focused on the village rather than the town and division between the farmers and villagers in small towns grew.

The beautification movement was spurred on not only by aesthetic concerns but also ideological ones. This ideology was developed in artwork and literature of the time as the reinvention of Puritanism was fueled by Romantic visions of a tradition of moral rectitude:

Romanticism encouraged the orchestration of the organic, evoking an impression of picturesque complexity and employing a preternatural landscape as source of historicist metaphor. Fusing categories of history and fiction, it echoed an interest in the literary uses of the past and fostered as well a nostalgic empathy for New Englander’s authoritarian ancestors and their self-governing communities. (Wood 1997: 141)

When the villages of New England were beautified, they were at their economic peak but this balance soon shifted in favor of urban industrialization. The industrial revolution transformed the social structure of New England as it became both industrialized and urbanized (Nissenbaum 2001: 549) and “the glorification of New England’s culture took place simultaneously with the region’s actual industrialization” (Nissenbaum 1996: 51). Large immigrant populations, primarily Roman Catholic—first from Ireland and later from Italy—threatened the status quo of New England (Nissenbaum 2001: 549). Thus, the villagers intent upon beautifying their village greens were also intent on imaginatively creating a tradition that validated their view of what New England should be, namely an Arcadian vision of a lost, English past in order to assert their dominance over the new immigrants.

These villagers felt threatened by both rising urbanization and the migrant population and strove to take control of the landscape in order to mitigate the effects of the newcomers and reinforce their dominance of it:

In response, many members of old New England families did what they could to inscribe a particular version of New England history prominently onto the



landscape, to re-stake their historical claim on the region and remind visitors and newcomers just whose place this was, selecting and proclaiming a version of the past that specifically bolstered what they saw as their increasingly precarious position in the present. (Ryden 2001: 208)

Just as orators created a tradition and sense of stability through their ‘filiopietistic mythography’ so too was this myth physically inscribed into the landscape. The meetinghouses were enhanced, the greens or commons were cleared, planted and sometimes fenced in to protect them from traffic and the buildings were painted white. Paasi (1996) writes about how when the identity of boundary transgressors threatens territorial identity power relations can be revealed:

Some individuals, groups and classes are always more active in the production of territories and identities, while most people tend rather to be reproducers. These activists can exploit the elements of historical experience, tradition and ethnicity, for instance, to mobilize collective feelings and action in order to shape the social and physical space and its boundaries. (100)

The threat of industrialization and urbanization manifest in the increasing migrant population fueled the physical shaping of the landscape. This was mirrored in the imaginative version of the central villages through literature, engravings and even school books that were produced “in part as a cultural strategy by which members of the local elite could maintain their social authority” (Nissenbaum 1996: 47). Writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sarah Orne Jewett wrote about New England village life so influentially that when Dedham, Massachusetts divided in 1872 the newly chartered portion took their name from the fictive town of Norwood in one of Beecher’s novels (Wood 1997: 147).

Interwoven, complementary strands of literary, artistic and scholarly interest projected the center village as both physical setting and source of apocryphal seventeenth-century origins, whence came legitimization of the nineteenth-century worlds New England elites were building. (Wood 1997: 142)

This imaginative world was created in the physical landscape and became iconic. The imaginative formation of the icon through literature was reinforced by the engravings that also became popular at the time. John Barber, a self-made artist-artisan, traveled through Connecticut and Massachusetts sketching towns and villages and collecting information. He published two collections with histories,

descriptions and 400 engravings of these towns. In these popular collections Barber “accurately depicted a real landscape, but he imagined and visually stylized the white village in ways that appealed to and validated the accomplishments of New England townspeople like himself” (Conforti 2001: 132). In light of these texts produced in the nineteenth century by new Englanders Meinig (1979) posits that “It seems reasonable to assert that in association with such activities an idealized image of the New England village became so powerfully impressed upon such a broad readership as to become a national symbol, a model setting for the American community” (166–7). Thus the iconic New England village became a national symbol.

The importance of the icon helped to protect the work of the beatification movement and despite the changes in the landscape brought on by industrialization, “until the first decades of the twentieth century, the New England green basked in the soft light of remembered patriotism, secure from neglect and usually free from further subdivision” (Stilgoe 1982: 30). At the heart of the center village the remains of the former meetinghouse lot or common land remained in the state the improvement societies had brought them to and served as places of communal gatherings for concerts, strolling and commemorations (Stilgoe 1982: 33). The growing use of the automobile changed many greens (ibid.) but the image of the common remained: “Along with ramshackle fishing docks, run-down dairy barns, and stone walls, quiet, ‘unspoiled’ greens like those in many western New England small towns became part of the calendar-image vision of New England” (Stilgoe 1982: 34). It is an image that evokes cultural memories of tradition and heritage developed in the nineteenth century which still persist today. Wood writes:

That center villages remain in the landscape today suggests the passing not of New England’s colonial past but of its commercial past. ... And so, ironically, what most marks the majority of center villages in the twentieth century is the fairly complete absence of the kind of commercial quickening that created and shaped them in the nineteenth century. ... Villages, once the sites of trading in commodities have themselves become commodities. (Wood 1997: 6–8)

This idea of the center village being itself a commodity affects the continued use of both the imagined communities and the physical landscape of small New England towns. The landscape itself has become an icon and so the towns are careful to maintain and promote the image.

### 1.3 Self Positioning: Growing up in a Small New England Town

The town of Harvard, Massachusetts is in many ways similar to the imagined towns figured in Hoffman's Massachusetts novels. It is a small town in central Massachusetts that has been careful to maintain its center village and cultivate an image that draws on a mingling of quaintness and community. This town is central to an examination of the self positioning of the researcher. My own family moved to the town of Harvard when I was two months old and my parents lived in the same house on Fairbank St. for the next thirty-five years. The majority of my childhood memories consist of the images formed through the experience of growing up in this small town. According to the imagologically-oriented historian, Olavi Fält, images can be described "as an intellectual heritage handed down to us" (Fält 2002: 8). The birth process of "an image is shaped by the information that we have received from various sources since our childhood" (Fält 2009: 41) making it "a mixture of memories, hopes, myths, love and hate" (ibid.). Thus, in the process of defining images, the central role of the creator or possessor of the image is stressed (Fält 2002). Clearly my personal experiences of biographical places are central to the images I have of small New England towns. In examining images of place, Parpei (2008) argues that

Along with the images formed by an individual we may bring in the concept of a *mass image* or a *public image*. To some extent individual and public images are inseparable—an individual is a part of a society or a group that tends to share some values and concepts of the world, both of which are used in working information into an image. (152)

Thus, the personal images I have formed in my childhood are intertwined with the public images of the town, state and region.

Fält (2002) writes about two categories of image—elite images and mass images. Elite images are more accessible in historical study if for no other reason than because until relatively recently only the elite had access to writing. Now, however, mass images are more accessible for many reasons. Together, these shared images are part of the way in which an 'imagined community' (Anderson [1983] 1991) is formed and sustained (Parpei 2008: 153). One way in which historians have tried to access mass images is through school books because the argument is that they lead to the "individual's subjective information on the world" (Fält 2002: 10). Indeed, education and school books "have a special position in the processes of construction and transmission or communication of

various images, discourses or messages related to both the political and the cultural sphere” (Susova 2008: 205). The significance of education in the formation of political and cultural images relates to questions of positioning, because I am within the images I am studying in that I was raised within the educational system where the mass images are propagated. However, I have led an adult life removed from them and so have distanced myself even as I have gained greater access to the elite images. Elite and mass images combine to create cultural memory and I have been raised within the cultural memory of a New England small town.

As a reader, I was initially attracted to Hoffman by her creation of places very similar to my own experience of small town life in Massachusetts. Although Hoffman was not raised in such a town her inclusion of much that resonates with my personal experience in her fictive towns intrigues me. This interest has continued to be at the heart of my research and is a dominant element of my positioning. Thus, I find Lotman (1990) to be particularly pertinent when he writes that “A reader brings his or her own personality, his or her own cultural memory, codes and associations, to bear on the text. And they are never identical to the author’s” (79). I do not have direct access to Hoffman’s personal perceptions of the images she uses and creates in her texts but my personal experiences and the cultural images I was raised with do have a strong influence on how I relate to her texts.

As a child going through the local school system in Harvard I was indoctrinated in a sense of the region as the founding heart and mind of the nation. Holt (2010) writes that Americans in particular “use history actively to animate the landscape, often elaborating Romantic narratives that make particular communities seem more significant or unique than they actually are” (280). While local significance is often inflated, it can be argued that New England culture is

... inextricably linked to the national culture. Even today students may study William Faulkner or William Gilmore Simms as Southern writers, or Willa Cather as a Midwesterner; but when it comes to Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Dickinson, they are studying *American* literature. These New England writers defined the national cultural tradition. (Nissenbaum 1996: 40)

In school in Harvard, Massachusetts, we were taught about the significance and national recognition of local thinkers and writers such as Cotton Mathers, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and we learned that many of the great

minds of the nation came out of our small commonwealth. In our history lessons we learned of the discovery of America and the coming of the Pilgrims and visited Plymouth Plantation; we had lessons on the colonial period and were taken to Sturbridge Village; we learned of the revolution and visited the site of the Battle of Lexington; I can even remember building a scale model of the Battle of Breed's Hill (more commonly known as the Battle of Bunker Hill) for a class. We were also taken through literature to help us better envision and understand the important role our small region had in the founding and development of the nation. Even before we were old enough to read classic texts such as *The Scarlet Letter*, *Ethan Frome* and *Leaves of Grass* we read stories of the settlers of the area as well as the work of authors such as Louisa May Alcott. (Indeed, since Bronson Alcott's attempts at transcendental farming took place in our town we visited the small museum Fruitlands every year.) All of these lessons and experiences served to form a strong image of the formative influence we have had on the nation.

The importance of the region we were taught was complimented by the experiences I had as a child. I grew up on the smallest lot in Harvard in the old school teacher's house facing the narrow end of the Little Common. Harvard is what could be described as a quaint old New England town. It was incorporated in 1732. In the center of Harvard, when I grew up, there was the Big Common with the Unitarian Church at the top of the hill and the Town Hall (complete with police station) directly behind it; at the foot of the Big Common we had the General Store and the Congregational Church. The Town Library was off to one side and down past the Little Common was the Elementary School. Directly behind our house was the neighbor's carriage house and behind that was the post office. I grew up in a house that was known for several distinctions aside from the small size of its property. The first was that we lived in the only house on town water—probably because there was no room for a well. Another distinction was that it is the youngest house on the street, having been built only about 130 years ago on the foundations of the old school teacher's house after it burnt down in a fire. Like the house, we were new and although the community was quick to accept us we knew we were not like others on the street—the Fosses and the Dicksons had been in town for generations to say nothing of the Harrods who had lived in Harvard since before it was incorporated in 1732.

On the official town website the "About Harvard" section ends with this sentence: "Through its zoning and other town bylaws, conservation land purchases and historic preservation efforts, Harvard has long been dedicated to maintaining its historical, small town environment and open spaces." It prides

itself on being known for a past filled with attempts at forming various philosophically and religiously based communities such as Shadrach Ireland's religious group, Mother Ann Lee's Shaker community, Amos Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands and Father Leonard Feeney's Catholic religious society "The Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary" (Scorgie 1976; Anderson R 1976). In the present it particularly highlights the excellence of its school system, high living standards and its apple orchards. The Harvard Historical Society carefully regulates the center and works hard to keep up pertinent areas of town such as the commons where I grew up. Walter (1980–81) writes that "the quality of place depends on a human context shaped by memories and expectations, by stories of real and imagined events, that is, by the historical experience located there" (163). Although all of these elements come into play in my sense of place in Harvard, as a child none of this mattered to me; all I cared was that I was free to roam as long as I watched out for poison ivy in the woods between our house and the school.

The landscape of Harvard, like all landscapes, is a combination of built and natural elements that have shaped and continue to shape each other. As a child, I moved through the landscape without attempting to read it, but as I learned more about the history and narrative of the town and region I began to be aware of the landscape.

The built environment is a sort of palimpsest, a document in which one layer of writing has been scraped off, and another one applied. An acute, mindful explorer who holds up the palimpsest to the light sees something of the earlier message and a careful, confident explorer of the built environment soon sees all sorts of traces of past generations. (Stilgoe 1998:6)

A favorite childhood spot of mine illustrates how understanding of what is being seen and experienced alters with a shift in perception. There is a place I loved to be in down the street from my childhood home on Old Boston Turnpike. There is a small brook that runs through the woods there and I used to love sitting on a rock in the middle of it and watching it rush by to spread out into a marshy area behind one of the houses on the street. As a child the brook seemed wild and free to me even though it was not. It is a landscape of particular significance to me that I enjoyed as a child because of my embodied sense of it. Returning to it now, I view it differently, aware that "landscapes always display a fragile equilibrium between natural and human force; terrain and vegetation are moulded, not dominated" (Stilgoe 1982a: 3). The brook obviously had to run under Old Boston Turnpike and this was where modern man was in most evidence because

of the corrugated metal tube that the water was forced through, but the brook on the other side of the road—away from the rock I liked to jump to—added to the layers of the palimpsest. Near the road there is a big slab of slate across the brook and this was another wonderful place for me as a child. I would lie on it at just that time of the day when the sun shone down through the trees, and look toward the woods by the school. In that direction the brook looks very different because it runs across what was once a swamp. Decades earlier some farmer worked hard to bring the brook into being, and so it is neatly lined with dark slate walls. These are not high walls by any means, but it is very easy to imagine the hours of work that must have been put into their creation. Even as a child I realized that for all their quaintness they showed a power—the power to control and tame seemingly wild places.

Despite the fact that the Harvard Historical Society holds sway, certain concessions have had to be made with the growth of the town population. It is no longer the dreamy town of approximately 2,000 with more apple orchards, swamp areas and conservation land than houses that it was when we moved there in the early seventies. The old post office became too small and a new building was built out past route 2 on Ayer Rd. in the place where Carlson's Farm Stand used to be. The police no longer fit into a small corner of the Town Hall and now work from a bland brick building up Ayer Rd. past Hillside Garage. The beautiful old brick library building is now a cultural center because the library's collection no longer fit and it has been moved into Old Bromfield. The town center is changing. There is even a stretch on Ayer Rd. that has been suburbanized. The old pastures have been asphalted over and Harvard now has its own Dunkin' Donuts and Baskin & Robbins. Despite the efforts of the Historical Society and other like minded individuals, Harvard has not been able to resist the pressures of expansion as a suburb of Boston. The feasibility of using the existing structures has of necessity forced changes on the landscape. And so, the places that I once thought untouchable have changed. Even my childhood home has changed with the addition of a new entrance to the basement—carefully approved by the Historical Society. Because of my positioning, this study of the ways in which Alice Hoffman creates her fictive, small New England towns draws upon my own personal experiences and understandings of how such towns look and feel as well as the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2.

## 1.4 Alice Hoffman the Author

Alice Hoffman is a prolific writer and has published over 29 books for both young adult and adult audiences as well as having written children's books and coauthored numerous screenplays throughout her writing career. She was born in New York in 1952 and grew up on Long Island where she was unlike the other children in that her parents had both gone to college, were divorced and her mother worked (O'Hara 2003: 194). She completed her bachelor's degree at Adelphi University (also on Long Island) and then for graduate school went to Stanford to study creative writing under Albert J. Guerard who taught the importance of personal voice; "This personal voice was made up of energy, imagination, and language—it was the very core of who a writer was" (Hoffman 2012). While at Stanford Hoffman worked to develop her own voice and embraced Guerard's lesson that "The elements that formed both the writer's themes and obsessions and the expression of his or her material included childhood fantasy life, stories heard in childhood, personal experience, and, perhaps most importantly, dreams" (Hoffman 2012). Hoffman's writing reflects this with her use of recurring themes and the clear influence of personal experience in her novels. She has a wide readership and has attained recognition for her work at a popular level. In her novels Hoffman writes stories of tight-knit communities where everyone knows each other and yet secrets abound. Her characters are involved in complex relationships of family, friendship and romance, and their interactions are tested and examined as crisis and mystery intensify situations. The novels weave places, people and time together to create narratives that explore love, loss and forgiveness for individuals and communities.

In various interviews, Hoffman has spoken about her work in many ways. Some of what she has to say is of interest to my research and some of the themes that keep arising are particularly pertinent to my focus. Hoffman's answers to questions about these themes are enlightening in that they provide access to the thinking behind the fictive accounts that she creates and illuminate the ways in which she attempts to create her narratives. The system of codes (cf. Lotman 1990: 63) developed in her novels is evident in what she has said about place and the making of myths, as well as in the magical quality of her writing that has some describing her as a magical realist.



### **1.4.1 *Places, Invented and Real***

Alice Hoffman has stated: “Place matters to me. Invented place matters more” (Antieau 2008). Her sense of the importance of place, particularly fictive place, is a concern that she allows to figure heavily in her writing. The homes and towns that her characters live in and move through have a vibrancy beyond that of mere background; setting becomes an active participant in her narratives. This is true at a range of scales from the houses and gardens through to the towns in which these homes are situated. She loads her places with meaning and significance and tends to develop a rich history for them. In this way, the layering of her places becomes accessible through her narratives and her sentiment that “sometimes I feel like the imagined can feel more real than the real” (Siciliano 2001b) becomes understandable through the detailed ways in which her places are developed. Bachelard writes that “imagination augments the values of reality” ([1958] 1994: 3) and this seems to be in essence what Hoffman is arguing; the idea that the imagined can seem more real because of its augmented nature. Hoffman’s imagined places are ones in which the values of the ‘real’ places she is influenced by are condensed and developed within the framework she sets up for them. Indeed Hoffman perceives the imagined nature of ‘real’ communities (cf. Anderson [1983] 1991) and continues this same sort of imagining in her fiction.

Hoffman creates small towns with tight woven communities that appear to be reminiscent of Rockwell’s illustrations. There is a nostalgic feeling to these towns. They are perhaps as we would like to remember such places as being. When she was asked if she thought small towns like those in her books still exist today, she responded by saying that:

Any institution becomes a community—whether it’s a high school or a boarding school or a publishing company or a small town where everybody knows certain things about people. It becomes—everyone is interrelated and I think it’s interesting to see how people react when they are thrown together. And I think there are still small towns that are like this. (Siciliano 2001b)

Hoffman creates her imagined communities and grounds them in small towns that contain layers of meaning and history for her characters. Regardless of whether or not such small towns exist in today’s world, they still exist strongly in the imagination. While mobility, both nationally and internationally, makes the existence of small, settled, rooted communities difficult to sustain these days, it also makes us feel a need for such places (Harvey 1996; Massey 1995: 48;

Cresswell 2004: 55–63). Indeed, it has been argued that although heightened spatial mobility has eroded the boundaries of place “it does not mean that the meaning of place has changed in social life and in certain respects the effect has been to make place more rather than less important” (Harvey 1996: 297). Through her novels Hoffman is able to create meaningful places for herself that also appeal to her readers.

They are places of community, rootedness and timelessness in which the pressures of modern society are muted. Siciliano (2001a) refers to this in a review of *Blue Diary* in which she writes of “...fictional Monroe, which, like all Hoffman small towns, is a place that exists in a timeless world, unfettered by the properties of present-day popular culture. ... Once you're inside her ageless world, you may find yourself questioning things in your own most timely one.” In an interview with Siciliano, Hoffman discusses the lack of specific references that would restrict her narratives to a specific time. Siciliano states that “the people [in the novel] could be living in any day, any year, any modern era” and Hoffman responds by explaining that she attempts to create the feeling that the events of the novel “could happen today, yesterday, twelve years from now” (Siciliano 2001b). This timeless quality in her novels enables Hoffman to overcome the boundaries set by a more specific here and now although the lack of mobile phones and the internet is somewhat restrictive. It also allows her readers to imaginatively situate the narratives within their own experiential sense of time and thus for me they echo my experiences of the late-1980s and 1990s. This same timelessness adds a fairy tale quality to the novels as they are primarily set ‘once upon a time’ in the relative present.

#### **1.4.2 Alice Hoffman and the Magical**

Fairy tales, folk tales and folklore are often mentioned in biographical sketches of Alice Hoffman’s life (O’Hara 2003: 194). Her own love of tales as a reader and listener has had a strong influence on her writing that she tends to allude to. This interest is not only apparent in her modernized versions of known fairytales such as *Beauty and the Beast* and *Bluebeard*, but it has a pervasive influence on her style from the timeless quality of her texts to the types of characters she creates. As one reviewer notes, “Hoffman’s finest novels are part Brothers Grimm, part Nathaniel Hawthorne, reworking a mixed heritage of tales about the dangers and the lure of the unfamiliar” (Churchwell 2003). Hoffman’s writing reflects her interest in a magical way of viewing the world around her that is informed by the

tales she has heard and read. She has stated that “magic in fiction is a long tradition ... one of the reasons we like fables and fairy tales is that they’re emotionally true, and page-turners at the same time” (O’Hara 2003). Hoffman draws on the traditions she is familiar with to create the magical in her writing.

In many of Hoffman’s novels the everyday ordinariness of life is subject to causalities that seem implausible from a rationalistic perspective. Wishes and curses determine the occurrence of events, certain individuals have abilities no one else does and sometimes ghosts even appear in crime scene photographs. Simultaneously, the mundane takes on magical qualities with clouds pondered as lakes in the sky and seeing through rippled glass altering understanding. Thus the magical becomes mundane and the mundane magical. Some of the occurrences that seem magical are so because they follow a causality that is not objective. Emotions are not simply catalysts but cause things to happen. Time is not quite linear in Hoffman’s texts either and the past is clearly manifest in the present. These qualities of Hoffman’s texts not only contribute to the creation of a fairytale like atmosphere, but could also be seen as markers of her texts being magical realist (cf. Rodgers 2002). Hoffman is sometimes described as a magical realist writer because her texts contain these magical qualities and the ‘reality’ of her characters is not circumscribed by rationalist limitations. There is a balance between the natural and the supernatural, but as Hoffman says, “frankly, I don't think I make much of a distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic.’ They both seem to be threads in the same cloth as far as I'm concerned” (Siciliano & Schwartz 2000). It is this lack of a distinction that allows for the magical to enter her narratives.

Magical realism is traditionally associated with Latin American works. Originally coined by art critic Franz Roh to describe Latin American paintings, the term was soon applied to Latin American literature where it was strongly rooted in an understanding of how the marvelous real is latent in Latin American tradition (Zamora & Faris 1995: 75). In his study of magical realism D’haen (1995) explores the present meaning of the term magical realism and claims that it has expanded in terms of North and South American literary developments in relation to postmodernism and since the early 1980s “these terms [have] allowed for spillage into other linguistic or geographical areas” (193). His study illustrates how as the range of texts opened up it became clear that magical realism is a part of postmodernism which uses a magical ‘reality’ to interrogate or even subsume dominant discourse:

[Magical realism] is a way of access to the main body of ‘Western’ literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender, and yet avoiding epigonism by avoiding the adoption of views of the hegemonic forces together with their discourse. Alternatively, it is a means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to dissociate themselves from their own discourse of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged. (D’haen 1995: 195)

Thus writers from all kinds of contexts from all over the world such as Salman Rushdie, Gunther Grass, Milan Kundera, Angela Carter and Toni Morrison are able to use magical realism for their own de-centric purposes. Many of these authors use magical realism to challenge the philosophical or political realities that marginalize or harm segments of the society in which they are writing. As Michiko Kakutani (1995) writes in an attack on the ‘cuteness’ of Hoffman’s adaptation of magical realism, in the works of serious magical realists “transactions between the mundane and the extraordinary are not merely a literary technique, but a mirror of an intractable social reality, a reflection of the logic-defying powers of history.” Although Hoffman does not use the genre for intense political purpose, her works do not include magical realism as “merely a literary technique.” In a short piece on voice in writing by Hoffman, she states that when she first began to truly study to be a writer she “had no understanding that domestic life is indeed political” (Hoffman 2012). Hoffman cannot be characterized as a feminist author, but she does deal with some of the politics of social realities for women in her writing.

In the past decades, the term magical realism has come to be applicable to the literature of non-Latin Americans as well, and not all critics, scholars and writers are as limiting in their conception of the genre as Kakutani:

What I don’t believe is that the literary form that is often attributed to the works of ... Latin American writers, that of magic realism, is a uniquely Latin American phenomenon. Magic realism is a literary device or a way of seeing in which there is space for the invisible forces that move the world: dreams, legends, myths, emotions, passion, history. All these forces find a place in the absurd, unexplainable aspects of magic realism. ... Magic realism is all over the world. It is a capacity to see and to write about all the dimensions of reality. (Allende 1991: 54)

Allende's statement allows for a variety of ways in which objective reality can be complemented by a paradigm that includes the fantastic while also opening up the genre to less political writers. Hoffman's use of passion and emotions as well as her use of myths and legend in relation to history do serve as "invisible forces that move the world." A brief definition of the genre: "magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Faris 2004: 1), enables Hoffman's writing to be labeled magical realism.

Her novels contain a mixture of the mundane and the magical that combines the miraculous into a commonplace world. Commenting on the type of magical realism Hoffman uses Churchwell (2003) writes:

Hoffman offers a realistic magic, decidedly female, in which folk wisdom, theosophy, superstition and witchcraft mingle familiarly with traditional domestic arts. Magical realism blends indigenous folk tales with Catholicism, but Hoffman's spiritual ancestry is Yankee Puritanism: her magic would have to be practical.

Churchwell is referring to the mythology of New England's past as a source of spiritual ancestry for Hoffman's writing. This is a mythology of Puritanism that has been secularized emphasizing a combination of 'moral perfection' and social utility (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 43). The role of the Puritans in New England is strongly present in the imaginative landscape of the region and Hoffman allows this tradition to infuse her everyday world.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing is central to a New England tradition of literature, and there are elements in his writing about the fictional, everyday lives of New Englanders that are magical. Zamora writes:

Hawthorne's compelling intuition ... was to find some "ungraspable" symbolic significance in ordinary experience. Hawthorne was deeply influenced by the Puritan allegorical understanding of the visible world as an embodiment of God's visible purpose and also by the transcendentalist view of the interpenetration of nature and divinity. He was, in fact, caught between the Puritan pessimism about fallen nature and the transcendentalist celebration of nature and natural man, and was deeply skeptical of both. But he embraced instinctively (and also self-consciously) the *openness* of both to the presence of mystery in the commonplace. (Zamora 1995: 509)

Hawthorne has been classified as a writer of romance (Holmes 1960; Milder 2008) as well as a naturalist or realist (Milder 2008). He came from a Puritan family and much of his writing is an attempt to deal with the legacy of the Puritans of the past (Mills 1948; Schwartz 1963) as well as a preoccupation with the concept of sin (Milder 2008). His fiction is often allegorical, consisting of a blending of naturalism with supernaturalism (Milder 2008) to create texts that reflect the mentality of the Puritans. The Puritan “religious mentality that accepted witchcraft as real and incorporated it within the framework of divine providence was a mentality that also accorded prophetic significance to dreams, voices, visions, and other ‘wonders’” (Hall 1985: 275). This way of viewing the world opens Hawthorne’s writing to “the presence of mystery in the commonplace” (Zamora 1995: 509). His own religious preoccupations combine with a realist eye (as evidenced by the sketches in his notebooks) to find spiritual meaning in the everyday world:

At once realist *and* romancer, Hawthorne would have it both ways; truthful to experience in his representation of character and circumstance, he departs from it in structuring events to reassure himself and his audience of life’s inherent order and meaning. (Milder 2008)

These tendencies in his writing are also affected by his contemporaries. Hawthorne was the friend and contemporary of Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow and Melville and their philosophies also influenced his world view. As Winters (1966) points out, “in examining Hawthorne, we are concerned with two historical centers: that of the first generation of Puritans in New England, in which occurs the action of *The Scarlet Letter*; and that of the post-Unitarian and Romantic intellectuals, in which passed the life of Hawthorne” (17). In the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne sets up a framing narrative that makes it clear that he is attempting to deal with the guilt and ghosts of the past, both personal and local. His forefather, John Hathorne, was one of the judges at the oyer and terminer of the Salem witch trials (see Chapter 6) and Hawthorne himself worked and lived in Salem when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*.

Although Hoffman was raised in New York and did not move to Massachusetts until an adult (Reichl 1994) she identifies herself as part of a New England literary tradition in how she sees the ordinary as containing the fantastic:

Hawthorne has given us a tradition that some people refer to as Yankee Magic Realism, and I do think there is a certain quality to the landscape that

definitely leads into the dark woods. Maybe it's how close we are to history here that makes Massachusetts such an interesting place to write about, or the sense that this was the initial American frontier, or the literary legacy of so many great Massachusetts writers. Maybe it's just those long, white winters which cause the imagination to wander into that territory. (Siciliano & Schwartz 2000)

In these words, Hoffman reflects the imaginative formation of the historical role of New England and particularly Massachusetts in the colonial period and the birth of the nation. Danforth's errand in the wilderness still persists in the imaginative identity of New England and the experience and reading of its landscape. Hawthorne's writing augments this cultural landscape and its magical effects as "he may have suspected that the actual of any historical period fell short of what the spirit and imagination required" (Milder 2008). This quality of awareness of place and the past is also apparent in Hoffman's imagination which has been nourished by tales of New England.

Hoffman's use of the magical, whether or not it is called magical realism, is bound up in the ordinary actions of everyday life. It is predominantly a mingling of folk sayings and superstitions with the actions and decisions of her characters. In reviewing *The Probable Future*, Nimura (2003) writes: "Hoffman's greatest strength here is her ability to keep the boundaries of magic indistinct—in her hands, superstition takes on the force of prophecy, and it's not always easy to tell witchery from folk wisdom." One of the most obvious fantastical elements in this and some of Hoffman's other novels is the use of witches. In exploring witchcraft in New England, Hall (1985) explains that "Anyone who practiced folk healing or fortune-telling became vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft" (280). Hoffman's witches work within this framework.

Hoffman's use of witches draws in part on her New England literary heritage, particularly the imaginative representation of the Salem witch trials of 1692. The trials have been shaped and reshaped in both scholarly treatises and popular imagination. The Salem trials have resurfaced in different iconospheres in different ways, and over time they have become part of the darker side of the imaginative understanding of New England's Puritan heritage. They have come to represent the authoritarian, restrictive dominion of the Puritan leaders, and yet they are a relatively isolated incidence. Hall (1985) draws attention to an important distinction when he writes that before the infamous Salem witch trials "sixteen persons were executed as witches in Connecticut and Massachusetts,

another eighty-odd indicted or accused of the crime, and ... the majority of accusations that went to court resulted in acquittals of one kind or another” (266). The general belief in witchcraft was brought with the settlers from Europe and yet prosecution only rarely led to conviction. The majority of the individuals accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth century were indeed treated less harshly than the Quakers. The trials in Salem were an anomaly with so many factors contributing to them that scholarly debate is ongoing: however, one aspect of particular note in the trials is the disproportionate amount of females accused of witchcraft. This leads to agreement that gender was a contributing factor to the scale of the witch-hunt in Salem:

To explain the timing of the witch-hunts, [Karlsen] argues that a number of circumstances specific to seventeenth-century New England, among them a new role for women as spiritual leaders of the household, intersected with old myths to give the illusion that women were threatening male dominance. Witchcraft, she concludes, was woman-hating in the context of shifting values and uncertain property relationships. (Hall 1985: 275)

Hoffman’s witches are strong individuals who have an intimate relationship with nature that allows them to distance themselves from reliance on the community. They tend to treat their powers as a natural outgrowth of their family and relationship with nature, and others react to them in different ways depending on their own situations and needs. Hoffman has stated:

The theme of witches and witchcraft for me often has more to do with women’s history than with spells and magic. That women have drawn strength from controlling health—medical issues, birth issues—has also made them threatening. The same is true for ‘witches’—strong women in touch with the natural world. Women who can’t be controlled are often viewed as dangerous. (Morgan Gray 2004)

Hoffman’s witches have power that allows them to be independent of the community and this makes many of those around them uncomfortable as the community is unable to control them. This is particularly true of the witches of the past who are not simply wise women who have learned to use what nature provides them with to harm and heal, but they are able to use their skills and understanding of human nature to actively direct the lives of those around them.

Nevertheless, those who are recognized as witches in the early days of the towns are first perceived to be so because of behavior that is noticeable in its lack



of regard for the restrictions of society. Their lives are spoken of by others in the community because of their disregard for social customs and an independence of action, and sometimes the gossip leads to violence. The treatment of these women serves to highlight the inequalities in these seemingly ideal towns. In fact, as Massey (1996) points out, the “whole notion of the settled, happy village...believes the fierce inequality of the social relations on which such societies were in fact built” (65) and “the ‘local community’, precisely because of its assumptions of settled social relations, may often be particularly restricting of any woman’s desire to break out of the patriarchal norms of behavior” (ibid. 65). While Hoffman is not necessarily trying to directly attack these norms, her writing does nevertheless challenge hegemony in that her characters find power at a personal and communal level despite being either marginalized by or subversive within their communities.

The fantastical elements of Hoffman’s texts are not limited to witches and their power, but they serve as an example of how the magical and mundane combine. The magical aspects of Hoffman’s texts are pervasive and serve to create a reality in which she blends “the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time, without one taking precedence over the other” (Morrison 1984: 342). This gives her novels a tale-like quality without moving into the realm of fantasy.

## **1.5 The Massachusetts Novels**

Just as the concept of nation or region is a culturally invented tradition, so too is the concept of a literature. In the introduction to their history of American literature Ruland and Bradbury (1991) illustrate how the perception of American literature was created and recreated at various times since the founding of the nation. In the process canons have been created and challenged and a tradition has been shaped and reshaped. American literature is different from other major literary traditions in that it is quite young: “The American continent possessed major pre-Columbian civilizations, with a deep heritage of culture, mythology, ritual chant and poetry...But this is not the originating tradition of what we now call American literature” (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 3). Like America itself which is an imaginative creation of the Europeans that in many ways still dismisses the civilizations that were already in existence on the continent, Ruland and Bradbury (1991) argue that the literature of America also began with the writing of the settlers. Because of this “the main direction of recorded American literary

imagination [after Columbus] was formed from the intersection between the European renaissance mind and the new and wondrous land in the West the settlers found—between the myths they brought and those they learned or constructed after they came” (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 4). As already mentioned (see section 1.3) the writings of New England have figured heavily in the creation of a national literary tradition.

The novels by Hoffman explored in this study are influenced by the literary heritage of New England as a region and in many ways could be viewed as regional literature. Regional literature can be viewed in two ways. First, it is the name of a particular movement around 1870–1890 that is often also called the local-color movement. Writers across the country such as Kate Chopin in the South, Hamlin Garland and Mark Twain in the Midwest, Bret Harte in the West and Sarah Orne Jewett and Harriet Beecher Stowe in New England combined romanticism and realism to create stories and poems that were focused on the non-urban local. “The concern of this writing was to capture the peculiar flavor of regions and district, dialects and customs, dress and landscape” (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 191). Ruland and Bradbury (1991), Brodhead (1993) and others argue that these works can be seen as an attempt to find a new unity in the post-Civil War nation by not just opening up new regions but also new languages through which to speak of America:

It was part of the strength of this regional tradition, which became universally popular [within the United States] during the 1870s, that it not only called up and often sentimentalized an American past that was fading, but also gave expression to the yet as unvoiced and radical, thus introducing new aspects of American life. (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 193)

One of these aspects was women’s life. Stowe wrote of the ways in which regional writing could take everyday life experiences and use them as literary resource. Feminist readings of Jewett’s work emphasize that regional writing was able to encompass “a world where strong women were still in charge of essential functions and where women’s values as the nineteenth century identified them—values of family and community in particular—socially prevailed” (Brodhead 1993: 143). These New England women wrote of the region in a manner different to that of Hawthorne, Melville and Longfellow, giving voice and credence to everyday aspects of domestic realities. Nevertheless, these texts can also be read as part of the attempt to imaginatively contain the changes in the region brought

on by industrialization and immigration by asserting the ‘real’ nature of the local (ibid. 134–138).

Regional literature has continued to be produced since the local-color movement and is viewed in different ways today. Regions are both cohesive entities and subordinate positions of larger ones. They are social creations used to define territory as well as “an interpretation of social interests that gives geographic location priority over...other possible interests” (Davey 1998: 2). This can lead to shifting views of regionalism so that when examining regional literature in North America several different ways of using the term exist: as a principle that unifies a corpus of texts, as “the attachment of a writer to a particular place,” as a portion of “the larger body of the national literature” or as “a kind of ideological consciousness or discourse” (Wyile *et al.* 1998: x). Thus the use of the term is also conflicted and raises questions of who to consider a regional writer and how valuable regionalism as a conceptual category is.

There are parallels between the use of regional literature in the late nineteenth century and now. In writing of regionalism and the local-color movement Brodhead (1993) observes that regionalism became dominant just when “local-cultural economies felt strong pressure from new social forces, from a growingly powerful social model that overrode previously autonomous systems and incorporated them into translocal agglomerations” (119). Likewise, in an attempt to define a role for regionalism in postmodern culture parallels arise. The international sensibilities of postmodernism and the homogenizing influence of global consumer culture have “created a certain cultural and political dislocation and anxiety, which have thrown attention back on local cultures, on the notion of community” (Wyile *et al.* 1998: xiii) which can lead to a cultural shift in favor of the local and specific. In this sense regional writing despite its “traditional stereotype as an aesthetically conservative form” (ibid. xiii) can be a valuable conceptual category.

A large portion of Alice Hoffman’s adult literature can be viewed as regional writing. Her novels often contain similar features: small communities and their frictions, layered narratives told from multiple perspectives, multi-generational relationships, families, individuals struggling with their identity and strong connections to the natural world. They contain love stories, crime, mystery, gothic elements and a strain of magical realism. She does not produce series with overlapping characters, but her novels are distinguishable by her style and the manner in which she works with the themes of love, fear, loss, death and forgiveness. As one reviewer puts it: “A Hoffman plot leaves no thread untied.

Everyone, however hapless or hopeless, finds true love; every villain is foiled or reformed; and the characters take their bows in happy pairs, as in a Shakespeare comedy” (Nimura 2003). The narratives, while not particularly formulaic, do tend to find similar types of resolution. Her language use is floral and, for some critics, at times “Hoffman’s always richly cadenced prose proves...overabundant” (Churchwell 2003). Indeed critics feel that sometimes she gets so caught up in the layers and connections of her motifs and characters that the plot suffers, but as her large readership illustrates she is an effective storyteller:

There’s something almost sinfully satisfying about Alice Hoffman's fiction. In this archly ironic age, it's deeply unhip to confess a taste for magic and happy endings, but most people can't survive on a strict diet of postmodern posturing. Like a piece of old-fashioned chocolate cake, Hoffman's ... novel feeds a craving. It may not be especially memorable or surprising, but it's delicious while it lasts. (Nimura 2003)

The novels do not develop esoteric, philosophical treatises but rather combine everyday concerns and everyday experiences with a magical twist that cuts through the stultification of mundane existence. Broadhead (1993) writes that in the late nineteenth century one of the reasons regional writing opened up was because of demand, because of “intense and steady readerly desire” (118). In comparing her novel to old-fashioned chocolate cake Nimura shows that Hoffman’s novels incite a similar ‘readerly desire.’ They are written to be enjoyed and they work at an emotional level to engage the reader in an exploration of common themes and experiences.

A survey of Hoffman’s adult fiction shows that she tends to situate her narratives in one of four geographical areas: New York, New England (often Massachusetts), Florida and California, and in all of these books place plays an active role in the narrative. (A clear exception in many ways is her novel *The Dovekeepers* (2011) which is of a fairly different nature than the rest of her writing.) For the scope of this study, the focus has been narrowed to one discrete area, Massachusetts. Six of these books, in order of publication, *Practical Magic* (1995), *The River King* (2000), *Blue Diary* (2001), *The Probable Future* (2003), *Blackbird House* (2004) and *The Red Garden* (2011) serve as primary source material. These books, which will be examined in detail, have been selected because of certain unifying features: the small town communities created in them; the role tradition plays in these towns; the awareness of history and the sense of connection it creates; and the ways in which the characters deal with issues of

identity, belonging and rootedness. The books themselves are not directly connected to each other, although in *The Probable Future* some of the other fictional towns are mentioned in passing, but they are all similar in the type of small New England town they are set in. This connection is illustrated in the following description:

"The Probable Future" covers familiar Hoffman territory: a Massachusetts village resonating with three centuries of history and tragedy; a tribe of self-reliant and oddly gifted women; children on the brink of adulthood and love-struck adults gone as silly as teenagers; and a wet, green natural landscape described with more sensual detail than any of the characters. (Nimura 2003)

Nimura highlights some of the most common features of all of the books: the villages and their histories, the mixture of generations of powerful women, the effects of love. She ends the sentence by drawing attention to something central to all of these: the sensually described landscape at the heart of the New England town. This is indeed Hoffman territory, not only formulaically as Nimura undoubtedly meant it but also literally in terms of the landscape and the formation of place.

Essentially, it is the imaginative landscape of the New England town that unites these books creating what could be called Hoffman territory. The images built up throughout the history of New England provide Hoffman with a rich cache to draw on.

Hoffman's books are often set in small Massachusetts villages in which mythical versions of seventeenth-century New England have survived to the present day, like American Brigadoons. Massachusetts has a peculiar status in the American imagination; half-arcadian, half-austere, it is the legendary (if not historical) origin of the United States, the Commonwealth which held the infamous Salem witch trials in the 1690s, a land of harsh winters and tight lips, but also a postcard state of snug towns with white frame houses and tree-lined commons. This eccentric history provides Hoffman with the foundation for stories about clans of self-sufficient women living alone in old gingerbread houses who cast spells, mix potions, and do a lot of gardening. (Churchwell 2003)

The Yankee realism of Hoffman's texts is a direct outgrowth of the imaginative understanding of New England's past and the role it has played in the nation. Hoffman is able to include allusions to the Puritan images of the region as well as

a collective understanding of the significance of its past while creating narratives that explore the everyday lives of the people, particularly the women, living in small New England towns. As such, these six novels represent what is perhaps the most regionalist of her writing.

The small New England town is both a built physical landscape and an accompanying imaginative tradition. “Today, many Americans view New England villages through a haze of nostalgic imagery, and see them as quaint vestiges of a bygone day” (Lewis 2001: 98, 100). The image is a shared one and elicits thoughts of community and tradition in those who engage with it leading to new uses of these villages. As Lewis comments, “it is an additional irony that a good many New England villages, so long believed to be quaintly obsolete, have recently discovered that quaintness is a marketable commodity” (ibid. 101). Alice Hoffman draws on this nostalgia but produces books in which the quaintness is stripped away to reveal the complexities of the communities to be found in these New England towns as she creates fictional towns replete with all of the contradictions of tradition, complex relationships and the cultural memory of place.

## 2 Theory and Method

Chapter 1 has sketched the imaginative formation of a New England identity through the ideology and values expressed in literature and the shaping of the physical landscape with the settlement and development of the region. The cultural landscape of the region, which is dominated by the New England village, relies on the interaction of history and ideology to create its symbolic meaning. “Taken as a whole, the image of the New England village is widely assumed to symbolize for many people the best we have known of an intimate, family-centered, Godfearing, morally conscious, industrious, thrifty, democratic *community*” (Meinig 1979: 165). This symbolism is derivative of the way history is remembered in the region through the physical landscape, various forms of heritage and literature. Lotman (1990) writes about the interplay of culture, history and literature as follows:

The interrelationship between cultural memory and its self-reflection is like a constant dialogue: texts from chronologically earlier periods are brought into culture, and, interacting with contemporary mechanisms, generate an *image* of the historical past, which culture transfers into the past and which like an equal partner in a dialogue, affects the present. But as it transforms the present, the past too changes its shape. This process does not take place in a vacuum: both partners in the dialogue are partners too in other confrontations, both are open to the intrusion of new texts from outside, and the texts ... always contain in themselves the potentiality for new interpretations. This image of the historical past is not anti-scientific, although it is not scientific either. It exists alongside the scientific image of the past like another reality and interacts with it also on the basis of dialogue. (272)

The dialogue centered on the historical imagining of New England is ongoing. Early texts such as jeremiads and captivity narratives have been supplemented by a wide range of literary works to create a tradition of New England in literature. The cultural memory of New England draws on a historical understanding of the region and its importance in the formation of the nation as a whole. In her Massachusetts novels, Alice Hoffman contributes to the on-going dialogue as she re-creates the experience of living in a small New England town. She creates communities with a strong sense of place and explores the complexities of individual and group interaction with place and community. Central to this is the concept of experience and its topocentricity. This chapter provides a theoretical

and methodological background to an explication of identity, place and community in Alice Hoffman's Massachusetts novels.

## 2.1 Cultural Imagology

In its earliest phases, imagology focused on the study of image formation and worked from the basic belief "that images work in an epistemological economy of *recognition* value rather than *truth* value" (Leerssen 1992: 282). This work was directed at the analysis of national images and stereotypes. It specifically did not attempt to define or approach "reality" but rather worked with perceptions and their formations. The work of later imagologists such as Joep T. Leerssen takes an interdisciplinary approach to the examination of images that explores place and the use of images to create concepts of community. In *Looking at the Other: Historical Study of Images in Theory and Practice* scholars of historical image studies examine images and their creators in different historical contexts. The work of these sorts of researchers employs interesting conceptual tools, however their use is a bit too restrictive as they seem to remain focused entirely on national images. Nevertheless, the potential application of their concepts can be opened up to encompass a wider range of images within a new form of imagology.

In his paper "Notes Towards a New Imagology" Anthony Johnson (2005) writes of the potential development of this new type of imagology, an imagology that would move outside the examination of national images. He writes that "rather than tying itself to one particular topic, imagology might more usefully extend its horizons: offering itself as a service discipline in image studies for anyone wishing to relate the subject to their own field of interest" (4). He refers to more contemporary work that he sees as potentially part of this new strain of imagology which he describes as

a truly interdisciplinary field of inquiry [which] would attempt to pool the findings of areas as diverse as art history; culture, film and media studies; geography; history; information technology; philosophy; psychology; semiotics; sociology, and the hard sciences (as well, of course, as language and literature) in order to better understand the bewildering variety of digital, graphic, optical, mental, verbal and perceptual images that are encountered in everyday western life. (Johnson 2005:4)

This new imagology then would allow for the use of tools of imagology in ways that would enable a detailed study of the image of the small New England town.



Johnson's expansion of horizon could ironically actually be a narrowing of focus, narrowing from overarching national images to more discrete regional and local ones as they are presented in Alice Hoffman's Massachusetts novels. Integral to this is an examination of geographical concepts related to the experiencing and understanding of place.

## 2.2 Cultural Geography and Place

Cultural geography has been said to come out of Carl Sauer and the Berkeley School's reaction to the dominance of environmental determinism in the field of geography. Beginning in the 1920s and extending over a period of 60 years, geographers thought of culture as "a way of life" that could be treated "as a unitary variable that is able to explain a spatial pattern" (Gibson & Waite 2009: 411). Working with what he termed 'cultural landscape' Sauer explored how a cultural group's cultivation shapes the natural landscape to create specific lived environments. These sorts of studies, which often focused on material cultural aspects at a regional scale, dominated Anglo-American cultural geography until the 1970s and the emergence of the humanistic geographers. Another school that can be seen as shaping humanistic geography on the European continent came out of the work of Paul Vidal de la Blache and *la géographie humaine* which took in influences from sociology and history (Häkli 1999: 73–4). Vidal de la Blache and his followers focused on region while Sauer and the Berkeley School studied landscape. Despite this difference in focus, both worked with the dual premise that the individual is active and culture is a synthesis of human activity. Thus geographical research came to focus on an interest in the relationship between humans and nature (Häkli 1999: 74).

The humanist geographers of the 1970s, such as Yi Fu Tuan, Edward Relph and Anne Buttimer brought the concept of place—as the name of their branch of geography implies—closer to the concerns of the humanities. They expounded upon the need to view place in terms of the individual's experience of it. Empirical facts about place were seen as being inadequate and the objectivity of the geographer's gaze challenged. So they developed a paradigm that posited experience as a major factor in the illumination of place. Buttimer focused on the responsibility of the researcher as both insider and outsider (Buttimer 1978) while Tuan explored how people give meaning to their environment (Tuan 1974; 1975; 1977) and Relph strove to raise awareness of an individual's relationship to place (Relph 1976). They viewed the environment as lived, experienced, loved, hated,

shaped and read. Working with the idea that landscape, place and area are given individual, subjective meaning that cannot be quantified, the unquantifiable *genius loci* or 'sense of place' became a focal point (Häkli 1999: 78-80). These geographers developed ideas of place related to the everyday experience of the individual exploring levels of belongingness and the concept of home. David Seamon shared Relph's ideas of insideness and outsideness but used them to develop what he calls place-ballet as he focused on place in relation to habitual movement (Cresswell 2004: 34). Later geographers in the broader field of cultural geography however found the humanistic viewpoint (particularly Relph's work with place and placelessness) too idealistic.

In the late 1980s the postmodern 'cultural turn' led to what has come to be called 'new' cultural geography in the Anglo-American tradition. The postmodern 'cultural turn' was part of a wider shift in the social sciences and humanities which attempted to develop a new set of conceptual tools that would be useful in examining contemporary social change. In this 'new' cultural geography work was conducted on meaning and power and their relationship to the symbolic landscape that drew on a mix of ideologies and perspectives derived from post-Marxism, phenomenology, structuration theory and feminism. All of these enabled researchers to confront different forms of oppression that had been hidden behind the normalizing conceptualization of culture as a uniform "way of life." Many of these geographers thought of places as "the product of processes that extend well beyond the confines of a particular place" (Cresswell 2004: 50). Feminist geographer Gillian Rose (1993) worked with Tuan and Relph's ideas of home and attachment but explored a darker side of limiting boundaries and restrictions. Doreen Massey (1991) viewed "place as open and hybrid—a product of interconnecting flows—of routes rather than roots" (Cresswell 2004: 53). The political ramifications of place and boundaries in terms of class and minorities were studied by Tim Cresswell (1996) and David Harvey (1996). In terms of Finnish developments in cultural geography, a key figure in determining the direction cultural geography went in the 1980s is Pauli Tapani Karjalainen (Häkli 1999: 80–1). Working from within a phenomenological framework Karjalainen turned to existentialism as a means of examining lived environment which led to the developments of concepts such as intimate sensing and topobiography. Although the geographers interested in processes turned to a mix of ideologies, in most of these different theoretical approaches the epistemological stance taken relates to perception, to a phenomenological approach to knowledge and being.

## 2.3 Phenomenological Roots

All of the methodologies and theories touched upon in the preceding section are linked through their phenomenological approach to knowledge. Basic epistemological questions are explored in relation to everyday, lived experiences. Husserl's development of phenomenology began within Cartesian rationalism but argued with the cognitive focus and position of natural sciences in Descartes' work (cf. Väyrynen 2009). Husserl turned to subjective experience but did not succumb to subjective idealism. He maintained that there is a reality beyond our subjectivity but also that an object does not have to actually exist in order to be meaningful to our subjective experience. Hence, our ideas of abstract objects and concepts are as appropriate and important subjects of study as concrete, physical objects.

Husserl developed an epistemology based on the interrelationship of subject and object, through the concepts of *noema* and *noesis*, as the basis of consciousness (cf. De Paul 1993; Thompson 1995; Väyrynen 2009). Basically, the subject gives meaning to objects through an intentional act that defines the *noema* (the object or the content of a thought) through the subjective interpretation, *noesis*, which is then the meaning or sense of the intentional act. Thus, the subject intentionally defines meaning based on how the object is perceived but there is no consciousness without an object. However, the same object can be given different meaning by different subjects depending on the contextual horizon.

The horizon of context is related to Husserl's conception of the life-world. "The life-world is the frame of subjectivity through which the individual apprehends and interprets the external world" (De Paul 1993: 140). This interpretation of the world relates back to intentionality, since meaning is given to objects based on use. "In order to work out the 'intentions' that went to form objects, Husserl suggested bracketing out preconceptions and thinking afresh about the taken-for-granted assumptions in everyday life" (Crang 1998: 108). Thus a phenomenological viewpoint was one that focused on the life-world but did so through an analytical study of perception. This perception is affected by the world into which the subject is born and the framework of contextual meanings through which the subject perceives objects, the contextual horizon. "Since Husserl uses the term 'world' in a special sense in which it is almost synonymous with 'horizon,' he can then claim that the essential feature of being a conscious subject is the having of a world" (Thompson 1995). Husserl's groundwork in phenomenology is of course important, but it is to Martin Heidegger's work that

many of the theories and methods discussed above refer. Heidegger was a student of Husserl's who chose to look into the very nature of being. Working with Husserl's phenomenology he shifted focus from consciousness to 'Being', a move resulting in the book *Being and Time* (1927), in which he develops the concept of *Dasein* (existence for human identities). By expounding upon the insight that "human existence is grounded in our always already finding ourselves in a world" (Wrathall 2005: 10), Heidegger argues that active engagement with the world is necessary to thought and feeling. In contrast to a Cartesian postulation that all could be an illusion and the mind could continue to produce thought and feeling, Heidegger states that it is necessary to be in a world.

A concept that is central to both philosophers' work is that of essence. Husserl claimed that essence is what makes something what it is and that when we look at being, "essence is the principle of the individual" (Thompson 1995). In order to approach essence Husserl developed the concept of phenomenological reduction which allows for reflection through bracketing leading to an uncovering of structures of consciousness (De Paul 1993; Scott 2003). For Husserl "phenomenological reduction turns our attention away from the social, historical and cultural determinants of the ego to a transcendental domain of consciousness" (De Paul 1993: 140). Heidegger's use of the concept is less static, unlike Husserl's conceptualization of the term as a universal quality, and Heidegger specifically allows it to be determined by horizon. "When we decide what any particular object *is*, and thus decide what its essential properties are, we do so by selecting out from the infinite properties it has some subset that is most important" (Wrathall 2005: 92). This shift in conceptualization of essence relates to being-in-the-world: "Different domains and world will consequently have different Heideggerian essences, and part of inhabiting a world is being moved by the essence proper to the world" (Wrathall 2005: 93). Thus different horizons can radically influence the comprehension of the essence of an object, an idea which is of particular interest in light of cultural geography and cultural imagology.

Heidegger's philosophy shifted through different phases, but there is one essay that is particularly interesting in terms of its application to conceptions of place and perception, "Building Dwelling Thinking" (originally presented as a lecture in 1951). In the essay Heidegger examines the relationship between dwelling and building. The argument is begun through a focus on the etymology of a series of words related to dwelling and building. Heidegger writes that dwelling is such a commonplace experience that it is easy to forget what it should comprise. He then introduces the concepts of sparing and freeing or preserving.

“As human beings, we cannot fail to dwell, for dwelling, ultimately, is the essential existential core of human being-in-the-world from which there is no escape” (Seamon 2000). In tracing etymologies to the thing itself Heidegger returns to the idea that humans have forgotten how to dwell properly and that it is dwelling which brings and preserves essence. “Man’s relation to locales, and through locales to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially” (Heidegger [1927] 1993: 359). This concern with dwelling is one that has complex ramifications for place as well as space.

In addition to Heidegger’s engagement with dwelling, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s development of concepts related to embodiment have influenced humanist and other cultural geographers whose methodology and theory is informed by phenomenological thinking. Merleau-Ponty posited that the lived-body is central to the nature of knowledge. In opposition to Cartesian duality and the need to ignore the body in order to exercise the mind in search of knowledge and truth, Merleau-Ponty argued that it is necessary to recognize the corporeal nature of knowledge, experience and perception (Wylie 2007: 147). Any attempt to examine truth or knowledge from a dispassionate cerebral position while ignoring our embodiment as a way of knowing, as what is known through, would be detached from concrete existence. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s stance is that “human being is being embodied” (Wylie 2007: 148) and embodiment is central to experience. This conception of embodiment is not simply that any and all knowledge is attained through the body. Even more than that, it is seen as the ontological foundation of existence.

A final phenomenologist whose work influences some of the methodology and theory found above is Gaston Bachelard. He devoted much of his attention to epistemological concerns, but his phenomenological work deals with the imagination and images. He treats images by approaching them from a more positive perspective than that of rational explanation and instead strives to experience them. “His approach to images is that of a phenomenologist — that is, one who partakes in the life of the image from the moment it enters the consciousness of each individual reader until the image reverberates in the reader’s entire being” (Vigneault 1993: 240). In the process of approaching images from a phenomenological vantage point he chose the four traditional elements of earth, air, water and fire as methodological context and then explored them through inter-textual images. However, it was in his last works that his

approach was most phenomenological as he approached the imagination through reverie.

## **2.4 Phenomenology and Place: Philosophy in Practice**

Returning to the key scholars mentioned above, I will now show how their writings are informed by phenomenological concepts. Husserl's initial development of a phenomenological epistemology with his ideas of intentionality and life-world has obvious application to the study of relationship to place. This can be seen in the following example:

The presupposition here is that an author has a special ability to capture experience; that literature is a transcription of experience grounded in the life-world. What takes place here is a transition from the objective landscape to a subjective one, from the outer to the inner reality, or phenomenologically, to a dialogue between the inner and outer worlds. (Karjalainen 1998: 8)

As a cultural geographer, Karjalainen has worked to develop a methodology that allows him to explore how the subjective experience of being relates to the external objects of a place the individual finds full of meaning. He calls this "direct and deep personal meeting with the world" (ibid. 1) 'intimate sensing', and posits Husserl's idea of the 'life-world' as an ontological starting point.

However, it is Heidegger's reworking of phenomenology that appears to carry the most impact on conceptualizations of place. Heidegger's conception of being-in-the-world is of particular interest to a study of place in two ways. First, the implication of thinking and acting through material objects leads to a view of place as the product of the subject's interaction with it (Crang 1998: 109). Tuan (1975), one of the founders of humanistic geography, writes:

The small pleasures and irritations of day-to-day living, the barely registered but omnipresent ambience of sound and smell, the feel of air, soft soil, and hard ground, the happy accidents and occasional blows of fate — these are the common experiences of life that may add up to a profound sense of place. (161)

He is interested in how the essence of a place can affect the subject. It is through personal experience, through interaction with a place, that the subject can come to understand and know a *genius loci*.

Obviously, Heidegger's work with dwelling is also significant. Both the cultural geographers mentioned and cultural imagologists are concerned with questions of rootedness and attachment to place, and through his work with dwelling, Heidegger reveals his philosophical consideration of it. As Johnson said "He felt he was rooted and tried to come to terms with his rootedness through language" (Johnson 2006). Cultural geographers make use of his etymological development of dwelling in their work (Karjalainen 1998: 3–4; Relph 1976).

The second implication of being-in-the-world relates to Heidegger's sense of care (Crang 1998: 110). He has moved from Husserl's intentionality to look at how being necessitates a focusing of attention on particular aspects of the world creating different fields of care. The types and levels of care vary at different times, but the concept of care is linked to the world; "our knowledge of the world is always em-placed, it is always starting from and based around places as centres of our 'care' about the world" (Crang 1998: 110). Relph describes these fields of care in terms of attachment to place. He writes that "to care for a place involves more than having a concern for it that is based on past experiences and future expectations—there is also a real responsibility and respect for that place both for itself and for what it is to yourself and others" (Relph 1976: 38). In *Place and Placelessness* (1976) Relph explores varying levels and types of interaction with place—developing a complex classification system of various types of insiders and outsiders and their relation to a place—and examines how they relate to fields of care:

Places are not abstractions or concepts, but are directly experienced phenomena of the lived-world and hence are full with meanings, with real objects, and with on-going activities. They are important sources of individual and communal identity, and are profound centres of human existence to which people have deep emotional and psychological ties. (Relph 1976: 141)

Thus, through care, relationships with place become equally important to relationships with other people. This becomes particularly interesting in light of the experiences of Hoffman's characters in *The River King* as they are explored in Chapter 3.

Both implications of 'being-in-the-world' come into play in Buttimer's work. In her essay "Home, Reach and Sense of Place" (1978) she compares Newtonian and Einsteinian paradigms while exploring concepts of 'home', 'horizons of reach', 'insiderness' and 'outsiderness'. She refers to dwelling specifically when

she writes: “Personal identity and health require an ongoing process of *centering*—a reciprocity between dwelling and reaching—which can find its external expression in the sense of place or regional identity” (Buttimer 1978: 38). However it is when she writes of place and meaning that the implications are mostly clearly evident:

There are many dimensions to the *meanings* ascribed to place: symbolic, emotional, cultural, political, and even biological. People have not only intellectual, imaginary, and symbolic concepts of place but also personal and social associations with place-based networks of interaction and affiliation. (Buttimer 1978: 15)

The use of intellectual, imaginary and symbolic in terms of concepts of place predates Benedict Anderson’s development of ‘imagined communities’ but are clearly applicable to the imaginative formation of New England. The personal aspects of ascribing meaning to place function not only at a communal level but are also integral to ‘topobiography’ as it is used in Chapter 5. Buttimer reflects both aspects of Heideggerian ‘being-in-the-world’ as her focus is on both the creation of place through the meaning it is given and the attachment to it.

Seamon also examines insiders and outsiders and how they relate to place but in his work this is done through movement and what he came to call place-ballet. He used Merleau-Ponty’s ideas of everyday movement to employ bodily movement as the key to the essence of geographical phenomena. Thus he examined how individuals move through and in place. He looked at daily routines and studied place as it is embodied by insiders—who move through the ballet smoothly—and outsiders—who move awkwardly (Cresswell 2004: 33–4). In his research, Thrift turned to events and practices rather than perception, arguing that focusing on how we do things leads to a more basic understanding of the world. (The topobiographic study in Chapter 5 includes an examination of embodied experience.) Both Seamon and Thrift employ Merleau-Ponty’s conception of embodiment in their research into place. In summarizing their work Cresswell writes: “Place then needs to be understood as an embodied relationship with the world. Places are constructed by people doing things and in this sense are never ‘finished’ but are constantly being performed” (2004: 37). Embodied, performative aspects of place contribute to our understanding of and connection to place.

Bachelard’s work with images and the imagination is of obvious importance to cultural geography. Bachelard writes of ‘imagination’ a great deal as he argues



that “imagination augments the values of reality” ([1958] 1994: 3) sharpening all our senses and preparing the phenomenologist for instantaneousness. Indeed, Bachelard describes phenomenology as “a philosophy that believes in the primacy of the imagination” (ibid. 224). The imagination is linked to values and memory as “[a]ll memory has to be reimagined. For we have in our memories micro-films that can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of the imagination” (ibid. 175). Imagination is in opposition to reductionism, and Bachelard questions its relation to reality: “Yet I wonder if an image of the imagination is ever close to reality. For often when we think we are describing we merely imagine” (ibid. 120). The link between imagination and images is pervasive throughout the text. He writes that his “problem is to discuss the images of a pure, free imagination, a liberating imagination that has no connection with organic incitements” (1994: 225). Bachelard writes of great images and images that set the waves of the imagination radiating as well as primal images, but at the same time he claims that images should be lived directly and exaggerated—taken to their extreme. Still, Bachelard states that “[m]an lives by images” (ibid. 109). These are the images studied in cultural imagology. Johnson speaks of three worlds of imaging in relation to the focal areas of cultural imagology. Two of these three worlds, *internal imaging* and *external imaging* come together in what Johnson labels the *interface*. Interface is the world of “reverie, projection and meditation” and as the name of the word implies, it is conceptually derived from Bachelard’s work, particularly in his last three books (Johnson 2006b).

## 2.5 Conceptual Tools

My understanding of phenomenological concepts has shaped some of the tools that I have borrowed from various fields in my attempt to develop cultural imagology in relation to an examination of the creation of place and community in literature. Some of this methodology and theory has been challenged of late because of its idealized view of place and home (particularly Relph) and I will also be shaping my tools with some of the thinking found in more recent work by feminist and postmodern cultural geographers such as Gillian Rose and Doreen Massey. Nevertheless, Alice Hoffman’s novels are written for popular consumption and part of their appeal is related to the very same idealized images contemporary theories seek to challenge rendering the challenged theory applicable. The reading of Hoffman’s places in the later chapters are predicated on an ‘in-world’ reading of the novels and as such focus on how the embodied

and experiential nature of place contributes to sense of place rather than the presence or lack of a challenge to the hegemonic concept of the small New England town. Although many of the conceptual tools are developed within the chapters where they are applied to Hoffman's novels, three larger concepts are presented here: sense of place, the iconosphere and resurfacing, and collective memory.

### **2.5.1 Sense of Place**

'Sense of place' has been a central concept in human geography since the 1970s and one of much debate as it can mean a lot of things. In attempting to create an overarching definition that can be applied across the various branches of cultural geography, Foote and Azaryahu (2009) write:

Sense of place refers to the emotive bonds and attachments people develop or experience in particular environments, from the national, regional, or urban levels all the way to the personal scale of the neighborhood and home. Sense of place is also used to describe the distinctiveness or unique character of particular localities and regions which emerge from their particular histories or environmental settings. (96)

Here we are introduced to abstract relationships such as attachment and emotion and a wide range of scale from national to the highly personal (Rose 1995: 90–2; Tuan 1975: 153). Specific places are also mentioned in terms of distinctive, unique features shaped by history and setting to create individual senses of place. The basic focus of sense of place then is on the subjective and perceptual as humanistic perspectives are brought to the fore in geographical study (Tuan 1974; 1975).

When sense of place conceptually rose within geography in the 1960s and 70s, it did so within two different traditions. Both of them stem from the dominance of positivism in the field of geography, but in different ways. The first of these seems to have risen within positivistic tradition and is described as environmental perception research. This tradition did not take into account people's strong sense of attachment to place on different levels from the personal to national and so perceptual and cognitive models had to be developed. Thus "sense of place pushed geographers to expand the scope of positivistic methodologies they applied to questions of spatial perception and behavior" (Foote & Azaryahu 2009: 97). The other tradition that developed did so in

opposition to the claimed objectivity of the positivists working with humanistic themes of interests, values, morality and reason. A subjective notion of 'sense' was combined with the objective concept of 'place' to emphasize the need to examine both subjective and objective aspects of human geographical phenomena.

Accordingly, 'sense of place' was established as a central term in new approaches to human geography and a range of linking concepts related to how place is experienced and related to were explored. Tuan (1974) developed the terms 'topophilia' and 'topophobia' to describe the intimacy, both positive and negative, that people develop in relation to particular places—experience being key to the shaping of place. Place itself came to be “about what it means to people” in terms of “values, obligations, intentions and commitments, as well as emotional and social involvements” (Foote & Azaryahu 2009: 97). 'Place' is then linked to ideas of identity, community, nostalgia, memory and consumptive and cultural aspects of everyday life. In all of this, the meaning of the term 'sense' is left vague but suggestive as 'sense' itself is hazy. It can relate to how stimuli are perceived while also relating to the faculty of mental capacity. Discerning awareness, rationality and feeling are all implied in 'sense.' The ambiguity of this term can be viewed as a strength as “it opens up possibilities as to the different ways in which humans address the special and particular about a place as the result of their engagement with space and landscape” (Foote & Azaryahu 2009: 98). By leaving the meaning of 'sense' open it can be used to address both the embodied and the imaginative aspects of the term.

Since place and sense can both be approached in many ways, it is clear that 'sense of place' can hold different meanings for different geographers. For some it can relate to how landscapes and environments are shaped as a range of social, cultural, ethnic, economic and other factors come into play in making place (Massey 1993; Hall 1995; Rose 1995). In contrast, for others it is closely connected to the idea of *genius loci* and sense of place is not at all created but rather an expression of the intrinsic qualities of a place. Still others view sense of place as related to feelings and perceptions at both individual and communal levels. Sense of place is often used to refer to the aspects of experience and perception that mark a specific place, give it a sense of authenticity (Relph 1976: 62–78; Crang 1998: 109) and create feelings of attachment and belonging (Tuan 1974; Rose 1995: 89). In contrast to this Relph (1976) has introduced the idea of 'placelessness' which in effect “means the loss of individuality, distinctiveness, and authenticity” (Foote & Azaryahu 2009: 98) as places are standardized and

difference is replaced by international, generic patterns. In addition to the fabrication of generic spaces, Relph's conceptualization of placelessness has been applied to virtual places via technologies such as television, film, photography and the internet. Some have argued that technology alters public-private balances undermining spatial boundaries while others argue that media can actually enhance specific places through their representation. Either way, placelessness is also a noteworthy concept when applied to the complexities of today's world.

Foote and Azaryahu (2009) write about three ways in which sense of place is an important concept in human geography. The first of these is related to how wide-spread the concept is across sub-disciplines. Human geography covers a broad range of concerns and sense of place can be seen to serve as a bridge between them as it is a concept many of these different disciplines employ. The second point is that it has helped sustain the humanistic side of traditions within geography while adding philosophical and methodological richness to the field. The third and final way in which sense of place is important to human geography returns to the growing focus on 'placemaking.' As Foote and Azaryahu write, "the shift from sense of place to placemaking reflects the growing academic interest in issues pertaining to social construction and cultural formation. Yet placemaking and sense of place are different perspectives rather than different issues all together: placemaking is about production, whereas sense of place is the end result" (Foote & Azaryahu 2009: 99). Thus sense of place (as well as placelessness) continues to be a pertinent topic in today's global society, making Hoffman's 'placemaking' in her novels a topic of considerable relevance and interest.

### ***2.5.2 The Iconosphere and Resurfacing***

The most important feature of Johnson's "Notes Towards a New Imagology" (2005) is the way he defines and illustrates the potential use for two cultural imagological terms or tools: 'iconosphere' and 'resurfacings'—both part of "a more precise lexicon for image studies" (4). 'Iconosphere' is a new term that Johnson is trying to develop based on his understanding of how Jan Białostocki has used the term. Johnson writes that the word connotes "a mapped world of possibilities from a particular period which has been realized in material form" (2005: 6) which can "function as a simple temporal marker: a moving index of all the images available 'out there' in the material world at a particular moment" (2005: 8). Unlike "the worlds of possible or colliding images that exist in every

individual's head" (Johnson 2008: 12) which are inaccessible for the most part, the iconosphere is made up of "those worlds of possibilities which have been realised in material form" (ibid.), a form which provides tangible access. 'Image caches', which can be understood as specific objects within an iconosphere made up of sensory cues, draw on the images of the iconosphere. Thus Hoffman's novels can be studied as image caches within the iconosphere of New England at the turn of the twenty-first century.

One of the ways in which image caches and their accompanying iconospheres can be studied by a cultural imagologist is to examine what image world is made accessible through the image cache and look for 'resurfacings'. Over time, portions of an iconosphere are accessible while others are hidden, and images naturally take on layerings as well. Thus, when an image from a past iconosphere is drawn into a new one, when it resurfaces, questions of accessibility, displacement, portability and loss arise. Johnson writes that this becomes particularly true when historical and geographical levels of imagological investigation are engaged in (as can be seen in the use of Puritans in various phases of the imaginative shaping of New England). Johnson's primary example in "Notes Toward a New Imagology" is his reading of Paul Muldoon's poem "Meeting the British" which seems to be particularly adaptable to this sort of examination of sensory images and resurfacings. Indeed, with his example Johnson is able to illustrate that "an image cache may have even more to offer in the context of its resurfacing than it did in the context of its original composition" (2005: 12). The layerings of images within an iconosphere are composed of the intermingling of present images and past images brought into new configurations.

Lotman, who is known as a semiotician, has conceptualised the semiosphere which is similar to Johnson's iconosphere and could be encompassed by cultural imagology. Lotman describes the semiosphere by comparing it to Vernadsky's use of biosphere: "The unit of semiosis, the smallest functioning mechanism, is not the separate language but the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. This is the space we term the semiosphere. The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture" (Lotman 1990: 125). The semiosphere has boundaries and is continually being shaped and reshaped by interaction with other semiospheres as well as by "the everyday reality of life" (Lotman 1990: 129). This second sort of shaping, which can be described as vertical and creating internal space, is written of in a manner that is reminiscent of autoimages and resurfacings. Johnson writes that "Although semiotics, as a science of signs has

much in its methodology that could be absorbed by image studies, its historical roots within the linguistic ‘turn’ that made Saussurean structuralism such a powerful force within twentieth-century thought may be seen, by the same token, to limit its applicability to other domains within the subject” (2005: 9). This comment is thrown in almost as an aside, but it is important because much of what Johnson and Lotman do with their examples is indeed very similar. The main difference seems to be that Lotman keeps returning to language at a very theoretical level in a way that detracts from all other aspects of his study of semiosphere.

In “New Methodologies: Imagology, Language, and English Philology” Johnson (2006a) returns to his conception of the iconosphere. Escher’s work entitled “Three Worlds” can serve to illuminate the layerings of the iconosphere. In “Three Worlds” Escher portrays a pond or lake and reflections of the trees growing by it on the surface of the water even as he shows through the surface to the fish below. This illustration demonstrates how the past, present and future are always interacting in the iconosphere. It also hints at resurfacing. Johnson describes the idea of layers and latent images in cultural memory and resurfacing by making a significant distinction: “But what is striking about this process is that resurfacing on the temporal axis—rather like portability on the spatial axis—brings a new meaning to the images that are carried over” (2006a: 17). Conceptually, this point links to Lotman (1990) and some of the ideas he presented in writing about memory:

the content of memory is the past, but without memory we cannot think ‘here’ and ‘now’: memory is the deep-seated ground of the actual process of consciousness. And if history is culture’s memory then this means that it is not only a relic of the past, but also an active mechanism of the present (Lotman 1990: 272)

This understanding of history as mechanism informs my approach to New England as a region. The role of memory in the formation of culture and place is evident in Hoffman’s novels and will be examined in the following chapters. The relationship between history, the past and the present is central in an examination of the concept of collective memory.

### 2.5.3 Collective Memory

In “Imagology: History and Method” Joep Leerssen (2007) writes of the relevance of the concept of cultural memory to studies of images and states that “Patterns, not only of Othering, but also of the maintenance of selfhood through historical remembrance and cultural memory, have been put on the agenda” (29) of imagological studies. The scholarly study of collective memory emerged with the work of Maurice Halbwachs. His two seminal works *On Collective Memory* ([1941/1952] 1992) and *Collective Memory* ([1950] 1980) theorize memory as a social function rather than the solitary act of recollection. Halbwachs’ initial theories were influenced by Henri Bergson’s ideas of the individual and habit memory and his rejections of Bergson’s concept of all memories being stored in the brain. Most of Halbwachs’ work was produced after a shift in his thinking toward sociology in relation to Emile Durkheim’s theories. Halbwachs’ contributions can be seen as complementing Durkheim’s work with times of marked cultural creativity:

Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory ... demonstrates the ways in which periods of apparent inactivity are filled with a variety of ritual and ceremonial acts of commemoration that not only help the recall of particular events but also serve to hold the community together. (Whitehead 2009: 128)

What enables Halbwachs to account for periods of “apparent inactivity” are the ways in which he develops the roles of external stimuli and groups in his theory.

Halbwachs takes a major step away from Bergson’s theories when he posits that individuals do not hold memories but rather that recollections of the past are partial and incomplete and that there is a need for external stimuli, generally an encounter or interaction with another person, in order to reawaken former experience. This reawakening of experience is the act of remembering. Halbwachs argues that people are always enclosed within some group and it is groups which provide ‘frameworks’ into which remembrances are woven. The encountering of a stimulus—a person from a group—enables the retrieval of a schema which contains experience. Thus, remembering “is an activity of reconstruction in the present rather than a resurrection of the past” (Whitehead 2009: 126). Those remembrances that are common to most of the members of the group are foregrounded while those that concern fewer members are not, and as group memberships change the foregrounded memories shift so that “social memory is constantly transformed along with the groups themselves” (Whitehead

2009: 128). Nevertheless, the collective memory is the most stable, permanent element of the group. The individual memories of members of the group are “a viewpoint on the collective memory” (Halbwachs [1950] 1980: 48) and these individual memories change in other group memberships of the individual. Because the collective memories are contained within the frameworks of the group, Halbwachs restricts collective memory to the span of a lifetime and memories that extend farther back in time become ‘history.’

Halbwachs’ conceptualization of collective memory is fairly rigid and many scholars find the apparent claim that individual memories do not exist too severe. However, even as they criticize his theories, it is Halbwachs’ ideas that their own are derivative of in that they are developed to compensate for the shortcomings they find in his work. Key scholars such as Pierre Nora, Paul Ricoeur, Jan Assmann, Noa Gedi and Yigal Elam, Paul Connerton, Avishai Margalit and Alon Confino are all indebted to Halbwachs for the presence of the social element of their studies of memory.

In light of the varying ways in which the term collective memory has been used in working with different, though often overlapping concepts, Confino (1997) proposes a double move:

that the history of memory be more rigorous theoretically in articulating the relationship between the social, the political, and the cultural and, at the same time, more anarchical and comprehensive in using the term memory as an explanatory device that links representation and social experience. (1402)

Aleida Assmann (2006; 2008; 2010) does so in her interrogation of the concept of collective memory. She differentiates semantic memory and episodic memory; semantic memory is acquired via collective instruction whereas episodic memory is embodied in personal experience and thus can be shared but not ‘transferred’ (A. Assmann 2008: 51; 2010: 37). Thus semantic memory could be seen as Halbwachs’ use of the term collective memory linked to his idea of social frameworks. However Assmann (2010) makes the assertion that “our personal memories include much more than what we, as individuals, have ourselves experienced” (40) and she objects to the vagueness and fallacies attached to the term collective memory, proposing instead a division of memory into individual, social, political and cultural components.

In “Novels and their readers, memories and their social frameworks,” Leerssen (2010) writes of “the curious power of historical narrative to project itself, by way of many different generic adaptations and ramifications, into the



public sphere and to form a collective cultural memory” (238). Here he returns to the idea of collective memory while postulating the cultural aspect developed by Assmann. He specifically examines the role of historical fiction in Belgium and the Netherlands as he explores how these two different readerships of the same language and a shared past have used fictional narratives in the creation of their national identities. He illustrates the insight that “private and public, often seen as complementary and distinct spheres, dovetail” (Leersen 2010: 239) as readers within specific catchment areas constitute “a virtual community, or what Benedict Anderson has memorably called an ‘imagined community’” (ibid.), through identifying with the narratives they read. This identification is important because there is an “ambivalence between the power of books to trigger mnemonic identifications and [an] impotence at doing so outside their proper social framework” (ibid. 241). The development of this social framework can be seen in the formation of “a canon of historical remembrance”; “public spaces [that] were actively fashioned, shaped, and retrofitted...[by] not only historical realities but also contemporary ideologies and selection mechanisms” (Leersen 2010: 248). Thus Aleida Assmann’s canon/archive distinction becomes complicated by questions of reception as different groups react according to different cues in interpreting the canon.

Lotman also explores cultural memory in terms of literary texts and cultural memory:

The text is not only the generator of new meanings, but also a condenser of cultural memory ... The sum of the contexts in which a given text acquires interpretation and which are in a way incorporated in it may be termed the text’s memory. This meaning-space created by the text around itself enters into relationship with the cultural memory (tradition) already formed in the consciousness of the audience. As a result the text acquires semiotic life. (Lotman 1990: 18)

Lotman seems to equate cultural memory with history in the sense of the past as seen through traditions. These traditions are always shaped, mediated so that cultural memory is “not the actual memories of the national collective, but the ideal memory of an ideal collective as reconstructed” (Lotman 1990: 113–4). Lotman is not writing about ‘actual’ memories, but imaginative interpretations of memories, colored by the understanding of those looking back at the society of the time written about in the texts—such imaginative interpretations are to be found in the literary tradition of New England.

## 2.6 Theory and Hoffman

As we shall see, cultural imagology provides conceptual tools for a study of how Hoffman draws on collective images and cultural memories in creating her fictional towns. Hoffman works with natural, built and cultural images from the New England landscape to create sense of place and explore levels of attachment in her novels, all elements of cultural geographical theory. She combines mass images (cf. Fält 2002) of New England with discrete images that are then developed within the narratives to create imagined communities that become invented places that matter (cf. Antieau 2008). These places matter because of how the individuals that live in them interact with them. Hoffman's novels explore answers to questions such as: How do individuals create meaning for themselves in relation to the places they live in? How do memory and lived experience come together to create self-narratives? How does the past, both private and shared, affect interactions with the physical and cultural landscape? How are communities created and maintained? The rest of this thesis explores answers to these questions with the aid of cultural imagological tools.

Answers to these questions lie in the mundane experiences of the characters as they lead their daily lives and interact with the towns they live in. Pocock (1981) describes the way in which concepts of place shape our interaction with the world around us by writing “[p]hysical place is ‘re-placed’ through our sensibilities by an image of place, which is no less real, while the phenomenon of sense or spirit of place highlights the experiential nature of our engagement” (17). Hoffman's narratives contain a strong sense of place that is developed through the communities and collective memories written into the cultural landscape. The past is shown to figure heavily in the present, the mythology of the towns is valorized and challenged and resurfacings not only reshape the communities but also affect individuals' sense of attachment and belonging. The meaningfulness of these imagined places for the individuals living in them is explored throughout the novels. Hoffman concurs with the claim that the imaginative formations of place can be illuminated by fictive portrayals of place (Donsbach 2011). Hence, she uses the subjective experiences of her characters to create identity and community.

Epistemologically “phenomenology rests on the belief that subjectivity *is* in practice a reliable centre of human knowledge” (De Paul 1993: 144) and so subjective experiences can be studied through phenomenological approaches to understanding such as those outlined in this chapter. For these reasons I would

like to investigate the ways in which, through her fictive towns, Hoffman explores subjective, everyday interactions with place through a cultural imagological lens. “The truth of fiction is a truth beyond mere facts. Fictive reality may transcend or contain more truth than the physical everyday reality” (Pocock 1981: 11). Hoffman develops interactive truths in her novels.



### **3 Community in the Small New England Town: Place in *The River King***

Lying in the heart of many of Hoffman's invented places is the village at the center of the small New England town which has come to symbolically represent certain ideals of community in the American imagination. In exploring some of the symbolic landscapes that have come to imply the embodiment of a set of cultural ideals and values, Meinig (1979) writes:

Among the most famous in America is the scene of a village embowered in great elms and maples, its location marked by a slender steeple rising gracefully above a white wooden church which faces on a village green around which are arrayed large white clapboard houses which, like the church, show a simple elegance in form and trim. These few phrases are sufficient to conjure an instant mental image of a special kind of place in a very famous region. (165)

As illustrated in section 1.2.2, when the Puritans first settled New England, they organized themselves around the idea of community. Social, moral and political ideology all intersected to create a sense of community that was bound up with the conceptualization of their errand in the New World. The combination of religion and civic life can be seen in the New England meetinghouses—rectangular buildings constructed of bare wood and left steepleless—which fulfilled both sacred and secular roles within the communities built around them. The dispersal of the first settlers was such that everyone in the town lived within reasonable proximity (4–5 miles) to the meetinghouse and joined with other members of the town in these buildings to shape the community under the guidance of ecclesiastical leadership (Lewis 1990; Vance 1990; Wood 1997). Over time, just as the imaginative meaning of community evolved to meet the changing needs and challenges of the towns, so too did the physical appearance of the meetinghouse. Conforti (2001) writes that “the re-Anglicization of New England culture and identity in the first half of the eighteenth century initiated the physical changes that would, over time, transform the region's primitive meetinghouses into widely recognized ‘churchly’ markers of regional identity” (70). Thus, the white wooden churches’ ‘slender steeples’ in the image of the New England town are equated to the Puritan idea of community.

The importance of this concept of the community can be seen in the Salem witch trials where members of the village of Salem (a sub-community in the town

of Salem) were accused and tried. Boyer and Nissenbaum (2009) argue for the need to focus on the role the idea of community played in the proceedings:

The fundamental issue was not who was to control the Village, but what its essential character was to be. To the Puritans of seventeenth-century New England, no social or political issue was without its moral dimension as well. For a community was more than simply a collection of individuals who happened to live and work together; it was itself an organism with a reality and an existence distinct from its component parts. (252–3)

Although the causes of the witch trials have been shown to be particularly complex, the frictions of the sub-communities within the village were of unarguable significance (Latner 2008). The community was in existential crisis, and the outcome of the witch trials, with the execution of twenty members of the community, serves as a particularly harsh illustration of the importance of its imaginative formation.

In spite of the many changes the world has gone through since the colonial days of New England, the idea of community is still strong, and the image of the nucleated New England village centering on its white church symbolizes this in the American imagination although the white church is seen as a symbol of community rather than religion. Harvey (1989) presents the argument that

... not only does the growing mobility and internationalization of these times make our old notions of places as settled, coherent communities more difficult to sustain but the very fact of heightened spatial mobility, and the feeling ... that we live in an increasingly unstable and uncertain world, also makes us *need* even more strongly that notion of place as secure and stable. (Massey 1995: 48)

New England villages have been built and protected to embody the image. The natural and built landscapes have been carefully ‘restored’ to conditions that evoke the villages of the eighteenth century (Meinig 1979: 176) to accommodate a nostalgic sense of community centered life and create a sense of groundedness and continuity. The tradition of the Puritans, rather than the actual practices, appeals in terms of the imagined communities the villages suggest. Hall (1995) explores the impact of imagined community by writing that

... a community also includes the idea we have of it, the images we use to conceptualize it, the meanings we associate with it, the sense of community

with others we carry inside us. These are the ways communities are imagined—and thus how we give the idea of community meaning. (182)

Implicit in this is the idea that each individual gives community their own meaning and so any shared sense of community is made up of both shared and personal meanings. Sub-communities form within larger communities as the imagined community becomes more discrete. Members of the sub-communities identify with specific images of their overall community.

Hoffman uses the novels studied here to explore how small, fairly tight knit communities interact; she particularly examines how various characters interact with place and negotiate levels of rootedness and belongingness as they move through complex weavings of the community. This is done by presenting the reader with a set of conflicts within the community that is closely related to an awareness of both the personal and communal past. In *The River King* (=RK), Alice Hoffman creates the small Massachusetts town of Haddon. Through Haddon she presents the reader with a town containing a prestigious boarding school (New England is known for its boarding schools so Haddon is not atypical in this respect), and as in many of her novels the reader is told a tale in which the past echoes through the present and strongly influences it.

### **3.1 The Communities in *The River King***

The town of Haddon in *The River King* is made up of a series of sub-communities, the Haddon School rather isolated from the rest. Already in the first pages of the novel, Hoffman devotes attention to the beginnings of the Haddon School and its relationship to the larger community. A situation of friction and tension is immediately revealed. When the school is first opened the prosperous farmers of Haddon “put aside their plows and watched as boys arrived from every corner of the Commonwealth and beyond to take up residence at the school, but even the wealthiest among them were unable to afford tuition for their own sons” (RK 3). When a public high school was built “the next town over” the friction increased. “Each time a Haddon boy walked through a storm to the public school his animosity toward the Haddon School grew, a small bump on the skin of ill will ready to rupture at the slightest contact” (RK 3). Hoffman underscores the schism within Haddon:

In this way a hard bitterness was forged, and the spiteful sentiment increased every year, until there might as well have been a fence dividing those who

came from the school and the residents of the village. Before long, anyone who dared to cross the line was judged to be either a martyr or a fool. (ibid. 3)

This division leads to the creation of several sub-communities within Haddan bearing clearly differentiated auto- and hetero-images that are reinforced with time. Auto-images comprise “the idea of *demarcation* of the inhabitants and other features” (Paasi 1986: 137) of a community from others outside the boundaries of the community. Sibley (1992) writes:

Strongly classified spaces have clear boundaries, their internal homogeneity and order are valued and there is, in consequence, a concern with boundary maintenance in order to keep out objects or people who do not fit the classification. ... Generally, strongly classified spaces will also be strongly framed, in that there will be a concern with separation and order. (115)

The sub-communities of the school and town have clear images of place and membership. The boundaries set in place to maintain their own identity lead to friction when the boundaries are crossed. The village and the school live a parallel existence in which various frictions lead to different aspects of each sub-community coming to the fore.

Boundaries are often conceived of “as dividing lines between social entities” but if communities “acquire their boundaries in institutionalised practices, and ... these boundaries are important as social institutions and symbols, not merely as physical lines” the implication is that “boundaries and identities do *not* need to be exclusive and permanent” (Paasi 2009: 225) despite their general persistence. The possibility of some sort of reconciliation between the sub-communities was tendered when a farmer’s daughter named Annie married the head-master of the school, Dr. Howe, but it quickly became clear that no reconciliation would occur. It was thought possible that Annie’s marriage to Dr. Howe would serve to blur the classification of space that maintained the boundaries of the community of the school, but Annie’s crossing the boundary did not reduce the tension. Instead, Annie Howe served to silhouette the contrasting images of the groups as she fell outside both sets of auto-images. Paasi (2009) notes “that boundaries do not locate solely in border areas, but may be detected everywhere in a [community], in diverging social practices, ideologies, and discourses” (225). Although Annie physically entered the sub-community of the school through her marriage to Dr. Howe she was unable to cross the boundaries of social practices, ideologies and



discourses. Eventually, she ended her life in a tragedy that became enshrined in the cultural memory of both the community of the school and the village long after her death. In the present of the narrative, the town has grown and changed to the extent that it contains its own east side/west side divisions and also, as a suburb of Boston, there is a steadily growing group of newcomers although they do not yet figure heavily in the workings of the community. Throughout *The River King* individuals explore and challenge the boundaries of these sub-communities as their understanding of Haddan develops.

### **3.2 Creating a Sense of Place**

In *The River King* not only does Hoffman present the reader with a community divided by classic elements of deep rooted friction, but she also succeeds in creating a town with a vivid sense of place. Rose (1995) presents the idea that “a sense of place is seen as a result of the meaning people actively give to their lives” (98–9). As will be shown in chapters 5 and 6, place is integral to how meaning is given to an individual’s or a group’s experience of the world. Thus “a sense of place can be seen as part of our cultural interpretations of the world around us” (Rose 1995: 99). These cultural interpretations are influenced by group and communal membership. Membership in a community and an awareness of its boundaries are connected to a sense of place. As the sub-communities of Haddan illustrate, social difference can be established by spatial boundaries (ibid. 99), but as the example of Annie Howe shows, crossing these physical boundaries may not be enough to enable a sense of belonging. Boundaries have the dual role of establishing insiders and excluding outsiders; “belonging to one place means that it may be difficult to feel a sense of belonging for somewhere else; and it may also mean that those who are perceived as belonging elsewhere are excluded from belonging to other places they may want to identify with” (Rose 1995: 99). Annie Howe becomes excluded by both sub-communities because of perceptions of boundaries. These boundaries are integral to the creation and maintenance of the sub-communities of Haddan and the sense of place embedded in their images.

An examination of how Hoffman creates a vivid sense of place in the novel is central to the discussion of how she uses place and community to communicate a sense of belongingness or rootedness to the reader. In a paper entitled “The Role of the Village in Creating a Local Structure of Feeling: Evidence from the Suburban Periphery” by Corcoran (2005), a set of three key elements are

identified as being central to the establishment of a sense of place: landscape, community and culture of place. The first element she explores, landscape, involves both built and natural elements but primarily focuses on the idea of the natural landscape. The second element in the establishment of a sense of place is in the relationships and interactions at both the individual and institutional level within the community. The third element, culture of place, is particularly interesting from an imagological viewpoint because it is described in terms of how “certain landscapes and built forms become cultural symbols” (Corcoran 2005: 6). Here a major aspect of focus is on rootedness in history. These same elements are all in evidence in Hoffman’s fictional village of Haddan with its strong sense of place.

### **3.2.1 Landscape**

Hoffman uses the setting and landscape of the novel in order to develop a vivid sense of place. This landscape consists of both built and natural elements that serve as focal areas of a sense of community. Robertson and Richards (2003) write that “[t]he land in which we live both shapes us and we shape it, physically by means of cultivation and building, and imaginatively by projecting onto it our aspirations and fantasies of wealth, refuge, well-being, awe, danger and consolation” (1). The landscape of Haddan consists of both built elements such as the buildings on the school campus and the village at the center of town and natural elements including bodies of water, flora and fauna. Landscape is often considered a matter of vision, a way of seeing and being seen, but embedded in the term is a range of concepts that relate to how environment and cultural processes come into play (Dubow 2009). In moving away from a purely artistic meaning of landscape, Tuan (1979) argues, “[i]f it be granted that landscape, in a general sense, is a composite feature in which elements of function and of use combine with values that transcend them, then it should be clear that landscape is not simply domain plus aesthetic appeal” (100). The natural portions of the landscape of Haddan are much more than background scenery for the events of the community; they are rather active participants in the shaping of it.

Landscapes contain meaning and “even the most ordinary, everyday, and taken-for-granted landscapes carry symbolic meanings that can be interpreted for their iconographic intent and effect” (Hoelscher 2009: 137–9). The iconography, or ‘text,’ of the landscape can be read by someone who tries to see the landscape in terms of vision, purpose and use. Such a reading of the environment could be

said to make it a landscape. Tuan illustrates this when he writes that “when a person faces the environment he may see alternatively an operational farm, a pleasant scene, and a type of social order. Should these different sets of clues amalgamate into a vividly coherent whole in his mind’s eye, what he sees is landscape” (1979: 97). The meaning contained in everyday landscapes comes out of cultural ideologies and systems and can serve an instructive purpose. Engagement with the landscape becomes interaction with the community.

In her study of sense of place in village communities, Corcoran (2005) found “that ‘countryside’ formed the crucial environmental backdrop” (3), but that it was more the idea of countryside—with abundant greenery in bushes, trees and fields—rather than actual countryside that was important. Another aspect that tended to help reinforce a small village mentality was the presence of a series of natural boundaries such as rivers and lakes. In *The River King* the natural environment is brought strongly to the reader’s attention. Throughout the narrative the original farming nature of the community is highlighted. Despite the fact that the town is being changed by suburbanization the rural mentality is maintained. One way in which this awareness is preserved is through the changing seasons and their effects on the community. Nature is clearly present as a force that cannot be controlled in the form of various storms and floodings which remind the people of Haddan that they are still at its mercy. But it is in the accumulation of detail that elements of the natural environment are brought to the reader. Sometimes, Hoffman uses long passages like the following to portray the landscape and the people living in it, but often she recreates the environment for the reader by mentioning specific local plants or animals as she describes the landscapes the characters move in:

It was a spectacular afternoon, the fields rife with late-blooming asters and milkweed, the sky as wide and clear as heaven. In the pine trees along the railroad tracks, hawks perched in the tallest branches; red-wing black-birds swooped across the distance. Stands of oak and hawthorn made for pockets of dark woods where there were still plenty of deer, as well as an occasional moose that had wandered down from New Hampshire or Maine. (RK 23–4)

Through descriptions such as this with its detailed mention of precise, local flowers, birds and trees a sense of “countryside” is evoked and a partially wild landscape created. The only clear intrusion of man on the scene is the railroad, but in writing that there are “still plenty of deer,” Hoffman indicates that this intrusion is not too great. Nevertheless, “landscape is not nature but nature

transformed by humanity” (Robertson & Richards 2003: 4) and the inclusion of “still” indicates that change has occurred and continues to occur although this change is mitigated by the mention of New Hampshire and Maine, both less heavily populated states in New England.

The use of nature and its interactions with the people living in the community help to create a strong sense of place. Hoffman’s imagery is replete with references to the environment in a fairly causal fashion. People are strongly influenced by not only the weather and the turning of the seasons, but also by the sight and smells of local plants, the sounds of various small creatures living amongst the trees and even by the quality of light. There are continuous references to these reminders of the natural world that serve to maintain a heightened awareness of the environment.

The Haddan River figures predominantly in the novel. It originates from Sixth Commandment Pond (thou shall not kill) and together the two play a central role in the community. The river is both a natural boundary line running along the edge of the school, and also an important place for the people of the town. Aside from the bridges that have been built across it the river has not only been left in its natural state but also carefully protected by the community. It is known for a special type of trout that lives only there, and the community passed strict laws protecting it after the summer when Frank Grey killed himself and the trout did not run. Thus, it is a place where local plants and animals flourish and the people of the community spend many hours enjoying walking beside it, rowing on it and fishing in it. These activities help to highlight communal aspects of the village and the river is viewed with a sense of pride. Hoffman also uses the river and other aspects of nature in order to connect seemingly disparate events in the narrative by juxtaposing events with descriptions that connect the events to the larger framework of the community.

Annie Howe tries to write herself into the community of Haddan School by physically altering the landscape by planting rose gardens on the campus grounds. In creating a physical change in the natural landscape she attempts to change the boundaries of the community and create a place for herself within it. Kolodny (1984) writes that “the landscape is the most immediate medium through which we attempt to convert culturally shared dreams into palpable realities” (xii). In planting her rose gardens and tending her flowers, Annie Howe tries to connect herself to the community and find acceptance within it. When the sub-community continues to reject her in spite of her attempts, she despairs and her final rejection of the community is shown in the act of cutting down the rose bushes. However,

she fails to destroy the roses and after her death the roses flourish and eventually become an integral part of the campus landscape.

Like Annie Howe's rose gardens on the school grounds, the glorious gardens of the garden club ladies on Main Street and the carefully tended gardens and yards of the west side all contribute to the landscape as well. They are controlled elements of nature that nevertheless assist in characterizing not only the town but also the people who create and control them. The assortment of flowers grown figures heavily in the imagery of the novel and serves as a contrast to the more wild aspects of nature. Hoffman's understanding of our relationship to nature is clearly in evidence in her writing. She uses nature in many ways ranging from imagery to causality to the creation of a sense of place. Through these uses Hoffman communicates the effect the natural landscapes have on individuals, and demonstrates what an integral, even if unnoticed, role they place in personal experience.

### **3.2.2 Relationships**

Obviously, a central component of attachment to place in a town is the quality of the network of relationships within the community. Corcoran (2005) found that in the localities she studied with a clear sense of place there was a "rich repository of close familial, kin and neighbourly relations" (4). These relationships served to create a communal network directly connected to a sense of place. As already mentioned, *The River King* contains several sub-communities with the villagers and the school interconnected despite the continuing frictions between them. The community of the village is most clearly reflected through Abel Grey, a third generation police officer of Haddan. Carlin Leander, a poor girl from Florida who comes to the Haddan School on a swimming scholarship, provides an external view of the community because she remains something of an outsider. A third character worthy of examination is the pharmacist of the village, Pete Byers, who has been serving the needs of the villagers and school people alike for the past forty years and has come to see into both sub-communities.

Abel Grey, or Abe as he is known by the villagers, has lived in Haddan his entire life and works as a police officer as did his father and grandfather before him. His life is built around a familial framework that has been reinforced through personal experience. He has attended the local high school "the next town over" and during a rebellious phase as a teenager he burglarized not only the nice houses of Main Street but even Dr. Howe's rooms on the school campus. Through

Abe, Hoffman is able to present a figure rooted within Haddan to the extent that he embodies what Relph describes as existential insideness “in which a place is experienced without deliberate and selfconscious reflection yet is full with significances” (Relph 1976: 55). This intimate knowledge of the town is reflected in Abe’s actions “He didn’t have to think when he rode around Haddan, he knew it so well he might as well have dreamed the town . . . He went out to Route 17 to consider his options, heading to his grandfather’s house on instinct” (RK 199). It is the very instinctive nature of his actions that reveals the extent to which he is familiar with his lived environment.

When Abe’s older brother committed suicide when they were teenagers Abe could not deal with his feelings of grief and guilt and so he began to get into trouble. His relationship with his father became too strained and so he went to live with his grandfather, Wright. Wright’s home was fairly primitive, but it was far enough out from town that Abe was able to enjoy nature there and developed a strong attachment to the place. Another place of great personal attachment for Abe is the Haddan River. Abe “knew this river better than most men know their own backyards” (RK 96), and sight of the river tends to trigger memories from early childhood on. For Abe, then, the river functions as a communal link and also a very personal image cache of memories that help him to feel firmly rooted in Haddan.

Abe’s rootedness in Haddan is apparent not only in his connection to his environment but also in the network of relationships that he has with different elements of Haddan society. In describing how villages construct identity Connerton (1989) writes:

Most of what happens in a village during the course of a day will be recounted by somebody before the day ends and these reports will be based on observations or on first-hand accounts. Village gossip is composed of this daily recounting combined with lifelong mutual familiarities. By this means a village informally constructs a continuous communal history of itself: a history in which everybody portrays, in which everybody is portrayed, and in which the act of portrayal never stops. (17)

As a local boy, Abe’s associations with all of the other local people working in town and living on the west side are layered by memories of past experience and an intimate knowledge of each other’s lives. Hoffman makes these layers apparent by injecting small comments about relationships or anecdotes from the past whenever different characters are encountered. They are generally benign

comments such as mention of how the florist lives half a block down from Abe, one of the forensic team members had grown up down the street from a victim or the ambulance driver had played baseball and wrecked his arm senior year, but they serve to highlight the awareness of connections that the townspeople have. These people share a sense of continuity and form a strong community in which the members show concern for each other's welfare and act on their sense of caring.

The complexities of the social fabric of Haddan are brought out clearly in Abe's relationships with people from the east side; people who he used to burglarize but now serves as part of his job. His behavior towards them reflects both his private knowledge about their lives and an understanding of their hetero-image of the people from the west side that allows him not to take affront at their snobbery:

She treated Abe as she did all civil servants, as though they were her own personal hired help. ... As a boy, Abe would take offense at the mildest slight, but he was no longer insulted when people from the east side talked down to him. For one thing, his line of work had allowed him to see behind the façade on Main Street. (RK 166)

His reactions illustrate that "the images of neighbours are composed of different mutually conflicting elements, of which one or several raises to the surface depending on the situation" (Alenius 71). Abe's feelings are tempered by his understanding of the situation. Similarly, Hoffman also provides some personal information at odds with the stereotypical image which those from the east side would like to maintain thus enhancing the intricate weavings of the community.

As a villager, Abe is used to reinforce the image of the school held by the locals. He knows the grounds well because of summer excursions when the school was closed and also because of teenage pranks pulled there, but his understanding of the school community is tempered by the villagers' image of the school. The hidden animosity that exists between the villagers and the school is not only strongly tied to the past but also the idea that the people from the school can have nothing in common with the locals. They are seen to move in a different world in which their connections, wealth and influence can only lead to problems if interfered with. The following passage illustrates the strength of the image within the village community and also gives a typical representation of how Hoffman weaves together elements that highlight the sense of place, the understandings of the community and the narrative. Hoffman begins by

describing what Abe sees as he steps out of the pharmacy onto the street with the photography teacher from the Haddan School. Various familiar people and establishments on the street are noticed and then Hoffman writes “Abe knew every shop owner and every street corner, just as he knew that anyone born and raised in this village who was foolish enough to get involved with someone from the Haddan School deserved whatever consequences he received” (RK 171). As Abe views the physical landscape of the street he is reminded of the social values encoded in it and the traditions of the community serve as a warning.

The hierarchies within the town are so ingrained in the community that when Abe is in a relationship and some of the women from the village who have known him all their lives conjecture about the woman involved they never even imagine that it could be with someone from the school.

That’s the way things were in the village still, after all these years: it was fine for the people of Main Street to do as they pleased, and a few had gone so far as to send their sons and daughters to the Haddan School, but expectations were different for anyone from the west side. Though they owned the stores and supplied the other residents with their shoes and chrysanthemums and cheese, people were expected to stay on their own side of town when it came to personal matters. (RK 214–5)

Even as ownership evinces pride in their sub-community, this also demonstrates a clear understanding and acceptance of the westsiders’ subordinate position within the communal hierarchies of the village.

As Abe’s relationship and his criminal investigations lead him into more and more contact with the school, his long-held conceptions begin to change. His feelings of rootedness also become challenged as he discovers that his lifelong best friend and fellow officer, Joey, is willing to be bribed by the school. As he comes to realize that despite all he knows about his community and the people in it there are still many secrets he is not privy to, Abe begins to lose his sense of Haddan. He tries to maintain this sense by spending time out at his grandfather’s place, but lying in the abandoned fields as he tries to re-establish his feelings of rootedness is not enough. The community is still strongly there, but Abe no longer feels so much a part of it. This can be demonstrated by the immediate reaction when Abe is fired from the police force because he will not cease pursuing investigations at the Haddan School:



By lunchtime, everyone in town knew what had happened. Lois Jeremy and her friend Charlotte Evans had already mobilized, but when they tried to reach Abe to inform him that they had started a petition to have him reinstated, he didn't answer his phone. Over at Selena's, Nikki Humphrey made up the sandwich Abe usually ordered for lunch and had it waiting for him, but he never showed up. (RK 288)

Members of the community are ready to support him but Abe rejects this support. Eventually, Abe is so disillusioned by the community that he feels trapped by the very intimacy that once rooted him and at the end of the novel he leaves Haddan.

The image of pampered, unearned—perhaps undeserved—luxury that is the image the villagers hold of the school students is also held by Carlin Leander when she first comes to the Haddan School on a scholarship. She is well aware that she is entering a community with which her background is at odds, and yet she feels that she must come. Interestingly, this need is driven by the sense of imprisonment she felt at home and is indicative of the potential strength of reaction to place:

Some people were simply born in the wrong place. The first thing such individuals searched for was a map and the second was a ticket out. Carlin Leander had been ready to leave Florida since she could walk, and she'd finally managed her escape with a swimming scholarship to the Haddan School. Although her mother had been reluctant to let her go all the way to Massachusetts, where people were bound to be dishonest and depraved, in the end Carlin won the battle. (RK 25)

Carlin arrives in Haddan because she felt that she did not belong at home. She is aware of the images of Massachusetts prep schools, and yet she chooses to come anyway. During the journey to the school Carlin begins to question the wisdom of her plan because she already sees how different the other students on the train out from Boston are, but then she takes comfort in the landscape the train is passing through. She “gazed out at the countryside, appreciating every haystack and fence that came briefly into sight as the train rolled on” (RK 24). Carlin feels drawn to the natural landscape, the rural sense of the area, but because her background is so different, she initially withholds herself from much contact with the school community. Living in it without feeling a part of it, Carlin is able to view the auto-image of the school community without being personally caught up in it. She becomes aware of both the official and unofficial history of the school and its lore

from an insider's perspective and yet she does not feel a sense of attachment to the place. Eventually she does form some attachments but they fall outside of the standard community of the school.

Initially, these attachments are to the environment but gradually they come to include some disparate members of the Haddan sub-communities. As she takes to wandering around outside after curfew, Carlin begins to gain a strong sense of the environment. "Each night, Carlin waited for the hour when she could flee from St. Anne's ... In an instant she felt free, let loose into the sweet, inky Massachusetts night" (RK 39). Carlin feels restricted by her position within the school community and so she turns outside of it in order to begin to create some sense of belonging in Haddan. Physically, she leaves the controlled school grounds and socially she begins to form a variegated network of relationships. First she befriends a fellow new student named Gus whose background is also not common to the school and then she begins to work for the old history teacher who has been at the Haddan School since Annie's Howe's days. Gus' attitude and behavior is such that he is unable to traverse the boundaries of the community of the Haddan School and participate in its social practices, ideologies and discourses (cf. Paasi 2009: 225) any more than Annie Howe was. When Gus dies—ostensibly drowned in the river—Carlin meets Abe who is investigating Gus's death. Meanwhile, Carlin begins to date the most desired boy at the school, but she comes to realize that in him the most disagreeable aspects of the villagers' hetero-image of the school are indeed true and once she knows he is responsible for Gus's death she severs the relationship.

The only relationship left by the end of the novel is one she forms with the nephew of the pharmacist. In each of these relationships Carlin comes into contact with different aspects of the sub-communities of Haddan. Because she is an outsider her perceptions allow for a silhouetting of the various images associated with different social groups. With time, however, she begins to find a place for herself in Haddan and with it a growing sense of attachment. When she confronts the choice of returning to Haddan or staying in Florida at the end of vacation, she chooses to return and Hoffman indicates her growing rootedness in Haddan through Carlin's relationship to the river: "In the height of the fine weather, Carlin began swimming in the river, at the hour when the light was pale green. ... the fish had grown used to her, and they swam along beside her, all the way home" (RK 324). Haddan has become a lived place for Carlin and her embodied experiences in it serve to strengthen her attachment to the cultural landscape as well.

In contrast to Carlin and the outsider's perspective she provides, Pete Byers is perhaps the most firmly rooted character in Haddan. He has owned and run the town pharmacy and grill for the past forty years and because of his occupation he is in contact with even more of the people of the town, and their secrets, than Abe. "Pete had been privy to more personal matter than anyone else in town" (RK 77) including those of the students at the school and because of this he has a unique understanding of local social structures and how they relate to individual experiences and realities. "People who were well acquainted with Pete knew he didn't gossip and he didn't judge" (RK 77). He is friendly and polite to all and always willing to listen and help. Through Pete, Hoffman is able to highlight the neighborliness of the community. His interactions with people from all of Haddan show a concern and caring that helps all of them to feel rooted in the community. They come to him for his willingness to listen and help, and because he does so without judgment they feel secure.

The secrets Pete is told in confidence are as drastic as those that cause Abe to start losing a sense of Haddan, and yet they do not have the same effect on Pete. Pete keeps the secrets and for him they are an integral part of Haddan because they reveal the individuality of its members. "It had been difficult all these years, never divulging a confidence, lying beside Eileen in bed with a headful of information he could never discuss" (RK 242). But it is this information that helps to root Pete to Haddan. His images of the social groups in Haddan are tempered by his understanding and even though the events of the narrative lead to a change in Pete as well, it is a personal one that does not disengage him from his relationships but rather strengthens them. "He'd begun to close the pharmacy early in order to get home and discuss the possibilities [of Abe's future] with his wife, Eileen, who he'd recently discovered had a great deal to say, having saved up twenty years' worth of talk" (RK 315). While Abe's experiences allow him to look beyond the eastside/westside distinction and see the townspeople as individuals, he clings tenaciously to his images of the school and they dominate his thoughts of how the sub-communities should interact. When he discovers that even Joey is willing to accept payment in exchange for leaving the school alone, Abe views it as a both a personal betrayal and an attack on the image he has of his community. Pete, through his everyday exposure to both the townspeople and the people of the school, has learned to view all of them as individuals. His understanding of the school people is not restricted by the sub-community images because as individuals "they are too much a part of [his] multifaceted daily

reality” (Alenius 2002: 71). In speaking with his wife, Pete reinforces his sense of how the sub-communities of Haddan come together.

Hoffman uses a wide range of characters in her fiction to explore degrees of attachment and rootedness. Some of these characters are insiders with such an intimate knowledge of their locale and community that it has become unselfconscious. This may lead to a secure sense of rootedness, as in Pete’s case, but Hoffman also creates circumstances that challenge attachment to place and community. Sometimes the conflict is resolved and rootedness remains intact, but Abe is an example of instances in which the individual leaves. Carlin represents the outsider with no initial attachment to place. As she gains her own personal experiences with place a sense of attachment grows. Through such characters Hoffman is able to show how networks of relationships and levels of attachment are interconnected. She uses a range of experiences to communicate different aspects of a sense of belonging and rootedness to the reader.

### **3.2.3 Culture of Place**

The creation of a culture of place links to both intangible and concrete aspects of place. Culture of place is perhaps the most directly connected to attachment of Corcoran’s elements as it contains aspects of the other two elements since it is connected to personal experience and response to landscapes and networks of relationships. Corcoran (2005) argues that “[o]ur unique, human responses to places and the associations they carry in terms of memories and fantasies, are at the roots of attachment” (6). While some of these memories and fantasies are unique to the individual, others are shared by a community. “The collective past is no less precious than the personal; indeed, the one is an extension of the other. The past is valued for its communal associations as well as its private ones. Particular features come to symbolize these shared recollections” (Lowenthal 1975: 12). These responses to and associations with the past are by nature fairly abstract, but they can be connected to concrete objects through tradition and manmade elements of the landscape that become cultural symbols for the community. These built forms take on layers of meaning as they are associated with the community over long periods of time and a sense of heritage is transferred through the cultural memory associated with the forms.

One of the ways in which Hoffman gives memory a durable form is through the use of buildings and statues. They serve as image caches that not only house auto- and hetero- images but also allow for resurfacing from the past. These

physical structures can be read as palimpsests with various layerings that contribute to an overall understanding of the configuration of the community.

Manmade space can refine human feeling and perception. ... the built environment clarifies social roles and relations. People know better who they are and how they ought to behave when the arena is humanly designed rather than nature's raw stage. (Tuan 1977: 102)

Hoffman's buildings serve as places central to the differing images and sub-communities of Haddan. At a fairly general level the basic layout of the town with the main streets of the village and the grounds of the school all serve to contain Haddan's sub-communities. The tensions addressed in the very first pages of the novel, for example, are brought to the reader's attention again when the present of the narrative begins with a staff meeting held in the school library. The library is built of river rock that was hauled from the banks by local boys, "laborers whose hands bled from their efforts and who cursed the Haddan School forever after, even in their sleep" (RK 8). But there are two buildings in the school that receive particular attention in creating its sense of place, the girls' dormitory known as St. Anne's and the elite boys' dormitory of Chalk House.

An examination of how Hoffman uses Chalk House to both create a sub-community and encapsulate auto and hetero-images of the Haddan School is particularly illuminating. The building itself is described as having been built too close to the river—it was completely flooded during the very first year the school was open leaving it in particularly bad shape—and Hoffman writes that it did not look any different from "any other dorm on campus" (RK 32). However, the auto-image of the residents of the building within the entire school community is overwhelming and comes to be embraced by its inhabitants in spite of the actually dismal conditions of the building:

For more than a hundred years, boys at Chalk had graduated at the top of the class, guided into a world of privilege with the help of those who had gone before them. There were Chalk alumni on most college admissions committees and out in the world more alumni were eager to hire a brother who'd lived in the old house beside the river, that falling-down pile of wood and bricks where the wind rattled down the chimney and the swans always put up a good fight when chased off the porch. (RK 33–4)

The sub-community contained in the building is established through an awareness of the past. When that first flood swept through the building in its first year, the

boys' school records were destroyed and they formed what they called the Magician's Club and altered the school records to steal other boys' grades. Ever since that very first year, the residents of Chalk have all committed some "hateful exploit" (RK 53) to gain entry into the group. An awareness of cultural memory is revealed not only in the Chalk member's knowledge of the deeds done over a hundred years before but also in the task that can allow a boy to avoid the destructive aspect of initiation. The nature of this task, which is directly connected to the Howes, shows that the boys of Chalk have passed this memory along for more than five decades.

Although the auto-image would seem to reinforce the hetero-image the village people have of the school, Hoffman also uses Chalk House in order to challenge it. This is brought out most clearly when the police—all local boys—come there to investigate a death. First, one of the officers drops his cigarette into a trash can in the student lounge and when it starts to set the trash on fire he jokes "'Burn the place down? Not a bad idea.' Matt was a local boy, with the local prejudice against the school, and it amused him to see bits of trash simmer before he doused it all with a cup of water" (RK 121). Once the reader is reminded of the friction, Hoffman challenges the hetero-image the villagers have of the school community as Abe's observations of the cramped attic are made: "In all those years of imagining how the other half lived, they had never imagined this. ... Now it seemed what they'd envied had turned out to be nothing more than a cramped attic" (RK 122). It is through the layering of conflicting images such as this that Hoffman attempts to show the reader the fallacy of a purely nostalgic understanding of communities like Haddan.

This disparity in auto and hetero images about boarding schools reminds me of how my own perceptions of them changed as a teenager. Although Harvard does not have a private boarding school there are many in the area and every year some of the children in town would enter into private school during the transition from elementary to middle school or more commonly middle school to high school. These shifts were always accompanied by a round of mythologizing tales about the virtues—sometimes academic but mostly social—of attendance at one of these schools. I first entered the campus of one such school when I took the standardized academic tests requisite for college application. We were directed to a beautiful old building with rich woodwork and leaded windowpanes, and it seemed as if the hetero-images I had been raised with would be reaffirmed. Then we were ushered into the school's testing room and I was surprised to find that the elegant furniture was bolted to the floor. When I asked why this was so I was told

that in the past the pressure of final exams had become so great that students had thrown the desks and chairs through the windows. Perhaps this too was a myth, but it certainly altered my image of such schools.

In *The River King* there are other buildings like the Chalk House on the school campus that serve a similar but lesser role in the narrative. There is also a series of buildings in the town of Haddan that fulfill a discreet role in the ways in which cultural memory relates to the friction between the school and the villagers. These buildings are ones that are funded by the Haddan School Alumni Association: “Such donations always followed a delicate situation at the school” (RK 111). They serve both the functions of remembering and forgetting. They are built to either remind of times at which the village helped members of the school community or to help the village community forget the school’s transgressions. During the conversation with the police chief, when Abe is warned against continuing investigating Gus’ death, he is also told that the Haddan School had just made a contribution that would allow work to begin on a medical center for the town. In both instances, the buildings serve as reminders to the members of both communities that they need each other.

Various statues in both the village and the school grounds also serve as reminders of the past. Some of these, such as the eagle in front of the town hall are mentioned at different points in the novel in relation to rituals of the village boys that link different generations together. The lamb that was set in the school graveyard in memory of the unborn Howe baby has different symbolic meaning for the villagers than for the members of the school. Perhaps the most interesting statue in terms of developing an understanding of how Hoffman interweaves communal memories of the past with the lives of the present within the narrative is a statue of Dr. Howe on campus. Ostensibly erected to memorialize an important figure in the history of the school, this statue of Dr. Howe is read in diverse ways by assorted characters belonging to different sub-communities in Haddan. The school community is not only almost instinctively aware of Annie Howe’s history, but they also know that the cause of her misery was Dr. Howe’s womanizing. For them, the statue is not viewed as a reminder of the man’s leadership or intellectual prowess, but rather as a sort of love totem. For the villagers, it is both a reminder of a man who held sway over the school for a very long period of time and also a physical representation of their hetero-image of the school community and the potential dangers it holds for the villagers.

These manmade elements of the landscape serve as a template for the community. The cultural memories connected to them achieve new layers and

meanings as time passes while the concrete reality remains relatively unchanged. “The durability of many artifacts and other traces of the past also engenders a feeling of accretion. The addition is cumulative: each year, each generation, contributes more to the scene” (Lowenthal 1975: 10). The buildings and statues Hoffman employs in her novel all help to contribute to a sense of the past stretching into the present and helping to create a culture of place. The perception of this culture varies with the images different sub-groups of the community hold. For the school community, the histories and lore that Carlin learned are part of what help to make the culture of a place where the individuals keep changing but the culture remains rather fixed. It is through physical structures such as Chalk House and the statues mentioned that these memories are best stored. Personal memories such as those Abe and Pete carry with them come with an intimate level of attachment while communal memories are related to a shared knowledge of connections. Buildings and statues can serve as image caches in the community which take on layers of meaning dependent on the images that the sub-communities attribute to or associate with them.

### **3.3 Change and Nostalgia**

It is inevitable that places and experiences of them change. If Hoffman were to present Haddan as a completely fixed constant, it would be nothing more than pure fantasy or at best a romantic portrayal of a highly simplified ideal, but she does not do this. Stilgoe (1998) writes:

The small town endures as the national attic of American social and spatial consciousness, a sort of frame through which further vistas are invariably viewed and twisted to fit. Always the small town is *out there* ... and always the disenchanted city dweller or suburbanite can drive there, get out, not lock the car, somehow be home. Given the staggering bias toward small-town living implicit in public and private school reading books from kindergarten onward, it is no wonder that big-city adults understand, albeit vaguely, something about small-town way of life and small-town space. (138–139)

Hoffman is able to draw on this “social and spatial consciousness.” However, instead of presenting an idyllic portrayal of these places, she presents the reader with a complex weaving of elements that lead to a dynamic community with such a strong sense of place that it can endure change intact. Nevertheless, a sense of nostalgia is created through the pervasiveness of heritage in the community. This



nostalgia is related to the ways in which the members of the community are aware of tradition and how the past influences their lives and relationships with each other:

Tradition derives from a need to establish some aspect of social life as continuous and unchanging in the face of innovation and change in the modern world...It produces a comprehensive ensemble of a few key elements, a historical image of selected elements of the past. (Wood 1997: 12)

The elements of the past that are included in Haddan's traditions have been selected to reinforce the sub-communities of the town while also defraying the friction between them. Nostalgia, "the subtle pleasure of imaginatively experiencing the past from the standpoint of the present" (Wilson 1997: 139), arises as the people of the town and the school community recount their traditions and the sense this gives them of place and belonging.

This sense of nostalgia is fueled by the fear that the pace of change today erodes tradition and attachment to place. "It is commonplace in Western societies in the twenty-first century to bemoan a loss of a sense of place as the forces of globalization have eroded local cultures and produced homogenized global spaces" (Cresswell 2004: 8). But as Wilson (1997) notes, "the pace of change, rather than effacing the past, may even intensify our memory of what is no longer there" (129). This intensification of memory can lead to a nostalgic revival of the heritage central to the cultural landscape of the community. Thus, although the sense of place Hoffman creates for Haddan is strongly tied to history, heritage and cultural memory, it is not fixed by them and the notion of change at both a communal and a personal level is present throughout *The River King*. There is a communal awareness that the town is changing as its proximity to Boston makes suburban growth unavoidable. Not only is the landscape changing as forests and fields are replaced by roads and housing projects, but the influx of new residents with no historical connections within the community is also felt:

Abe and Joey knew nearly everyone born and raised in Haddan, although with so much new construction on the outskirts of town and so many families relocating from Boston, it was definitely getting more difficult to place faces and names. Not long ago, every resident in the village was well acquainted with every family's history. (RK 101)

With the new 'historyless' faces among the residents of Haddon a lessening of the connections between the individuals in the community is felt.

Hoffman introduces placeless elements familiar to the post-modern reader into the town. The road to Wright's place is one of the most changed, with houses where there were once fields and even "a Stop & Shop market where Halley's farm stand once sold yellow beans and cabbages" (RK 200). The market chain with its generic, placeless structures had come to replace a local stand in a way common to suburbanization. Nevertheless, the physical heart of the village remains unchanged and is dominated by shops and establishments run by local people maintaining the landscape of the village and the sense of community and its past. Meinig writes that "there remains a power in [the New England village] landscape as a symbol of an attractive scale and type of local society, and some people do indeed move to such villages to try and recover some more intimate sense of community" (1979: 176-7). Hoffman's description of Haddon makes it clear that visually the heart of the village remains intact and there are still areas in town that appear to grow wild.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, people are nostalgic for greensward, for the open meadows of the half-imagined rural past, for the lawns of so many images ranging from mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century Currier & Ives lithographs to the carpetlike lawns advertised by fertilizer companies. (Stilgoe 1998: 126)

The central village of Haddon as a visual landscape fulfills this nostalgia with the picketed lawns of the houses in the village and the hints of history and continuity implicit in the landscape. This is perhaps what the new families have come to Haddon for; the sense of tradition and history inscribed on the cultural landscape. "[T]he ideological orientation to a past represents values of seeking to transcend the ambiguities and inconsistencies of present experience, which in turn generate a persistent reference to ideas of authenticity" (Chaney 1997: 145). Haddon, as a small town within reasonable range of Boston, appeals to the newcomers. Pete, who has played a central role in the community for years, reflects on the changes the town is going through:

Since the town had changed so much in recent years, with so many new people moving in, it was difficult for Pete to know everyone by name, which meant service wasn't what it once was. But towns don't remain the same, they go forward, like it or not; there had even been talk about building a town high school, out near Wright's old farm, for there would soon be too many

students to send to the Hamilton school district. It wasn't the way it used to be, that much was certain, back when a person would meet the same people at the Millstone on a Saturday night as he'd see at St. Agatha's on Sunday morning, knowing full well what there was to be thankful for. (RK 238)

Like Abe and Joey, Pete is aware of the change and yet he is so grounded in the community that his regret is related to the quality of service. Because he knows so many of the individuals from the different sub-communities in Haddan, Pete's sense of Haddan is shaped by the individuals of Haddan and their interactions with each other. Massey (1994) argues that "If places can be conceptualized in terms of the social interactions which they tie together, then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time" (155). The social relations of a community, informed and shaped by history but not fixed by it, weave together to create a sense of place. Through Pete's acceptance and understanding of individuals he is able to view the changes brought by the newcomers with equanimity and even positivity.

Abe is not able to react as flexibly as his understanding of the community changes. As levels of attachment to place change an individual's perceptions also change. This can be clearly seen through Abe's sentiments. As he begins to lose his sense of Haddan he begins to look at his surroundings anew. On several occasions he even loses track of how to drive to different places in town. It is as if with a lessening of attachment, the instinctive way he once moved through Haddan is gone and his uncertainty is directly translated into his driving. As Abe's sense of Haddan changes he becomes trapped by the very networks that once sustained him and decides to leave the town and sell Wright's place to the developers waiting to come in and add it to their suburban growth. Thus, Abe's lessened sense of attachment at a personal level also leads to the creation of a new placeless element in the community.

### **3.4 Hoffman and Rootedness**

The idea of a lack of attachment to place has taken hold, and many scholars and critics from a wide range of fields use this idea to speak of the deterioration of a sense of place and its negative effects on the world.

Arguments of place decline have a powerful emotional charge. We almost want them to be true because they reinforce nostalgic concerns about the

disappearance of a world of attractive villages and urban neighborhoods where everyone knew and was known by everyone else. (Relph 1996: 915)

There seems to be an innate desire to feel like we belong, to feel a sense of connection to the world around us and the people that figure in our lives. Gilligan (1982) writes of the image of community: “we like to think we live in identity-fostering, caring communities, but part of our day-to-day, lived experience is precisely the fear that we are increasingly adrift in a complex and uncaring world” (194). Perhaps, in using fiction to create locales with a vivid sense of place and to explore changing levels of rootedness, Hoffman addresses this fear.

Sometimes, cultures are caught between, on the one hand, the desire for the mobility and material rewards of modernity and, on the other, the nostalgia for a lost purity, stability and traditional coherence which the present no longer provides. (Hall 1995: 177)

Through novels such as *The River King* Hoffman creates places for the reader to feel this belonging in all its aspects. A deep sense of attachment can either support individuals or entrap them, but without such a sense of attachment, belongingness cannot occur.

In *The River King* Hoffman’s strong sense of place and examinations of various degrees of attachment and belonging are closely connected with the environment in the forms of natural and manmade landscapes and networks of relationships. In exploring the ways in which individuals interact with landscape, Cunliffe (2000) writes:

So, for people, their personal landscapes have many faces: they nurture through their productivity; they constrain and legitimize through their boundaries; they inform through their symbols; they instill awe through their waywardness; and they inspire through their distant vision of futures. In short, the physical *environment* (that is measurable and absolute) is a blotting paper into which the cultural images of *landscape* are absorbed. (112–14)

The landscapes of Haddan contain the culture of the community, and the individuals of the town experience and see the landscape differently as their attachment to the culture changes. Characters such as Abe, Carlin and Pete expose the reader to degrees of rootedness and its potential effects on an individual. Buildings and statues are employed as durable image caches that hold communal memories. Hoffman creates these elements in order to share a place with the

reader that fulfills the “nostalgic” longings—as Relp called them—that we have for supportive, tight-knit communities. The community Hoffman creates is not simplified or romanticized. She explores the intricate weavings of complex relationships and changing experiences of belongingness in a comprehensive fashion that admits both positive and negative aspects. For some characters, such as Abe, the very supportive nature of the community becomes so stifling that it is left. But Hoffman chooses to end the narrative with Carlin’s growing rootedness in her new home. In her fiction Hoffman invites the reader to dwell in a world that has a strong sense of place, rootedness and history while unflinchingly examining the wide spectrum of emotions such a place holds.



## 4 History, Memory and Mythmaking

To a large extent, Alice Hoffman's Massachusetts novels come from the literary tradition of the region. As the explication of New England's imaginative formation demonstrates, "tradition is one long, ongoing, never-resolved and never-abandoned attempt to impose an imaginative unity on the contradictions of the past" (Leersen 1997: 204–5). The ways in which the Pilgrims and Puritans have come to figure in both the national and regional understandings of history to provide a unifying point typifies this as does the iconology of the nucleated New England village centered on the common. As Woods illustrates:

Tradition and history are not the same concepts. Traditions are conventions that evolve. Traditions are the pasts we make in the present. The New England tradition of large colonial houses encircling town commons to form puritan villages was invented in the nineteenth century. (Woods 1997: 161)

These traditions are informed by a historical awareness of the past while subsuming the contradictions, both factual and imaginative, contained within them. At both individual and societal levels memories are shaped and maintained through traditions and as Foreman (1995) notes, "memory is grounded in the recuperation of the historical" (287). History and memory come together to create myths—the narratives that feed and shape identity, reinforcing the social frameworks of the community.

Remembering the past is important in terms of the articulation of identity in the present. The myths that a community or larger society forms provide it with a united sense of how the past has shaped who they are in the present:

Collective beliefs [about the past] are crucially important in fostering a sense of togetherness and solidarity. ... Memories are typically modified to suit particular situations and times, and do not always correlate with historical truths. Throughout the selection process, memories are reconfigured, becoming infused with myths. (McDowell 2009: 61)

This can be seen in how the Puritans were conflated with the Pilgrims in terms of their republicanism and in how the intolerant harshness of their image was mitigated by later orators (Conforti 2001: 172) so that eventually the secularized puritan work ethic became central to New England identity. The myth of these imaginative fathers of the nation is drawn on in forming the current identity of the region and figures heavily in the iconosphere. There is a sense of historicity to

myths as they are derived from memories. These collective memories tend to have some historical foundation; this foundation is shaped to make history comprehensible and imbue it with meaning and purpose in the present.

The prime function of memory, then, is not to preserve the past but to adapt it so as to enrich and manipulate the present. Far from simply holding on to previous experiences, memory helps us to understand them. Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic, selective reconstructions based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize, and classify the world around us. (Lowenthal 1985: 210)

Individual memories contribute to the creation and maintenance of collective, cultural memories. History and an understanding of the past become mythologized in the cultural memories of a group and shape its identity to create cohesion and unity.

In many of Hoffman's works there is an understanding that history and the past play an active role in the lives of individuals and communities. The cultural inscriptions on the landscape serve not only as a means of encoding and memorializing the values and heritage of the towns but also contribute to the establishment and maintenance of the collective memory of the communities. This community creates a social framework for the individuals which provides an understanding of when and how to act. It is maintained through the social and cultural memories of the towns. These memories are canonized and transmitted through archives, commemorations, stories and the landscape. As these memories are formed, maintained and revived they create a mythology that provides the members of the community with an awareness of how the past shapes and gives meaning to the lives of the towns.

#### **4.1 Collective Memory Revised**

Due to the multiple ways in which Halbwachs's original conceptualization of collective memory has been challenged and the ensuing vagueness of the term, Aleida Assmann (2006; 2010) has attempted to create a way to explore both the individual and shared aspects of memory. She proposes that based on memory research, memory be divided into individual and social, political and cultural aspects. This division is not absolute, but employs "extension in space and time, size of group, and volatility or stability" (A. Assmann 2010: 40) as three



distinguishing criteria. An important distinction between these pairings is that individual and social memories are ‘had’ whereas political and cultural memories are ‘made’ (A. Assmann 2006: 216). Aleida Assmann views social, political and cultural memory as clarifications of the ambiguity or vagueness that has arisen around the use of ‘collective memory.’

#### **4.1.1 Individual and Social Memory**

Individual memory is problematic in terms of stability because it naturally distorts and changes over time, and yet “whatever our memories may be worth from a scientific point of view, as human beings we have to rely on them, because they are what makes human beings human” (A. Assmann 2010: 40). As will be shown in detail in Chapter 5, individual memories contribute to personal identity and the images people have of themselves are shaped by the memories they include in their self-narratives. In *Blue Diary* Hoffman writes that as Jorie comes to terms with Ethan’s past her sense of her own past and the memories of a perfect life no longer fit her sense of who she is. Thus she illustrates how meanings are given to memories that make them important for the individual. However, the significance of specific individual memories changes over time and then disappears with the death of the individual.

As social structures of relevance and individual value systems change, things that used to be important recede into the background and hitherto unheeded things may call for new retrospective attention. Those memories that are tied into narratives and are often rehearsed are best preserved, but even they are limited in time: they are dissolved with the death of the person who owned and inhabited them. (A. Assmann 2006: 213)

The best preserved memories are central to the formation of social identity as it is built through the processing of subjective experiences and their integration into a narrative. Memory of personal experience “tends to fade with time unless it is periodically reinforced through contact with persons with whom one shared the experiences in the past....[It] is always rooted in other people” (Coser 1992: 24). In *Practical Magic*, also examined in chapter 5, Sally and Gillian Owen reinforce their memories through their telephone conversations and letters over the years—even when Gillian does not want to remember. Gillian particularly learns that memories are not forgotten when the ghost of Jimmy enters into a non-verbal dialogue with her. Thus it is through dialogue that individual memories are

shaped and maintained, and it can be argued that without this shaping, memories do not have meaning.

Family memory can also be viewed as individual as long as it remains restricted to the family as is the case with the Sparrow women of *The Probable Future*, who are the focus of chapter 6, for many generations. Although family memory is shared, much of this sharing occurs “on a purely private level” (A. Assmann 2010: 45) and is of limited duration. However, it can also be classified as social memory in that family memory exists within a social framework and serves to maintain that framework. It is this framework that Jenny Sparrow attempts to isolate Stella Sparrow Avery from by living in Boston rather than Unity. Familial social memory is the “invisible frame of shared experiences, hopes, values and obsessions [that] becomes tangible only when it shifts” (A. Assmann 2006: 214). Still it is embodied within the family and thus generational.

Aleida Assmann (2010) argues that generational memories are public forms of social memory: “While familial generations are indistinguishable on a social level, social generations acquire a distinct profile through shared experience of incisive events as well as through an ongoing discourse of self-thematization” (41). Social memory is linked to generational memory and thus reconstructed as generations shift. This is because it “refers to the past as experienced and communicated (or repressed) within a given society” (A. Assmann 2010: 41). Incisive historical events shape the beliefs, values, habits and attitudes of a generation creating an existential reality that one cannot escape. These generational memories are collective in that they are remembrances of discrete common objects—such as specific historical events—as well as collectively created and collectively held perceptions of the values and sense of a time (Schuman and Scott 1989: 378). As Schuman and Scott (1989) demonstrate

generational effects on memory are much more than simply a mental recording of external pointers to historical importance. ... it is the intersection of personal and national history that provides the most vital and remembered connection to the times we have lived through. (380)

While Schuman and Scott focus on international historical events in their study, their findings are applicable to other aspects of social engagements. This could be typified in the way the generation who drowned Rebecca Sparrow (Chapter 6) as a witch was affected by the event even though they never shared their experiences with others.

Social memory can be thought of as being contained in the image cache of a distinct time period. Other generations may be able to find some sort of entry into it, but the image cache is most open to those who have experienced it and can access it through personal memories. Social memory can also be seen as “the ‘cues’ given to individuals by their ‘memory community’ (whether family, village, church, nation or all of these), in suggesting both what to remember and how to remember” (Burke 2010: 106). Still, it is memory that is within individuals and their embodied interactions, and in this embodiment social memory is like individual memory. A striking example of this, as we shall see later, is in the embodied experience of the Sparrow women when they stand by the lake where Rebecca stood and the birds come to them. However, for most people embodied memories do not last longer than their carriers and in order for them to become long-lasting and transferable across generations they must be elaborated and organized: only then can they become trans-generational and endure (A. Assmann 2008: 55).

#### **4.1.2 Political and Cultural Memory**

When social memories are able to “cross a threshold in time” (A. Assmann 2006: 215) and become trans-generational they become political or cultural memories.

With the support of symbolic forms of commemoration, be they material such as monuments and museums, or procedural such as rites of commemoration, the limited temporal range of personal and generational memories can be infinitely extended in time. (ibid. 215)

As these memories become less temporally restricted they also take on the characteristics of fabricated entities, they are ‘made.’ They are “mediated and, in order to become a kind of memory, they both need to be re-embodied” (A. Assmann 2010: 42). These memories carry symbols and material representations and are designed for trans-generational communication. They become top-down institutionalized memory that is formed by libraries, museums, monuments and education. Hoffman demonstrates both forms of collective memory in *The River King*. The political memories of the town and school are shaped by their transactions with each other; whenever the image of the school is about to be tarnished, money or building projects are given to the town in order to cover the transgressions of the school. As the examples of Abel Grey and Pete Byers in Chapter 3 illustrate, cultural memories are multifaceted. Whereas political

memories are clear cut and created to emphasize homogeneity, cultural memories are complex and variegated (A. Assmann 2006: 220). In distinguishing between political and cultural memory Aleida Assmann (2006) makes an interesting distinction when she states that “Political memory addresses individuals first and foremost as members of a group; cultural memory relates to members of a group first and foremost as individuals” (221). This difference can be seen, for example, in the contrast between the official memory associated with a monument and contested memories held by groups peripheral to the hegemony like the different readings of the statue of Dr. Howe.

Political memory is constructed through these institutions which ‘make’ memories (as opposed to the embodied memories which are ‘had’) to construct identity. Political memories then “tend toward homogenous unity and self-contained closure,” rely on narrative to convey messages and are “anchored in material and visual signs” (A. Assmann 2010: 43). The meanings of these signs are clear and serve a normalizing purpose. History is taken and shaped to tell stories that reinforce and consolidate the identity of the dominant group. History becomes memory as it is shaped to become an emotionally loaded reconfiguration particularized to a collective identity. Used for political purposes, a clear example of such a shaping of political memory can be found in an examination of any national memory and its dominant signs as shown in the explication of the shaping of the image of New England in Chapter 1.

Cultural memory is made up of more complex signs that call “for more individual forms of participation such as reading, writing, learning, scrutinizing, criticizing, and appreciating” (A. Assmann 2010: 44). Cultures develop methods to facilitate the propagation and retention of information “deemed vital for the constitution and continuation of a specific group” (ibid. 43). Thus in literate societies, Aleida and Jan Assmann both find it useful to differentiate between ‘canon’ and ‘archive’ in examining what has been preserved. The canon then is what is actively remembered by the group for either formative or normative purposes (J. Assmann 1995: 132). As with political memory, it is institutionalized and selected on the basis of what is considered important for shared remembering and creating common orientations. In the town of Unity in *The Probable Future* (see Chapter 6), the canon is made up of the memorial statues on the green, the documents and paintings on display in the library and even the bricks of the railroad station with the names of people fed during the Great Depression etched into them. The canon includes that which is to be individually processed. That which is deemed worth retaining but not necessarily worth actively remembering

is maintained in the archive. It is made up of the forgotten, neglected and excluded and is not circulated as common knowledge. However, it exists in a latent state and therefore has the potential to resurface, to be “transformed into a living memory supported by public awareness and validation by cultural institutions and the public media” (A. Assmann 2010: 44). The library of Unity contains many more documents than those on display, and in this novel Matt Avery is able to gain access to them in order to conduct his research on the Sparrow women. Likewise, the canon is not fixed and so some things might be forgotten “while others may be recovered from the periphery and move into the centre of social interest and esteem” (A. Assmann 2010: 44). In this way memories can resurface and become encoded in the iconosphere. As detailed in Chapter 6, Hoffman’s use of the Sparrow women and the shift from metaphorical invisible ink to indelible ink illustrates how cultural memory can be reshaped within the community.

## 4.2 Community

In both *Blackbird House* and *The Red Garden* Hoffman’s interlocking short stories present individual and social memories that, across the chapters, sometimes become trans-generational and enter into the political or cultural memory of the town. This process allows for an exploration of how community is built and manifest in the daily lives of those living in it. Although *Blackbird House* focuses on one farm house and the various people who live in it, Hoffman is also able to build the community of the town of Truro around it. When the Hadleys first begin to build the house and farm, the townspeople think it is foolish for a fisherman to give up the ocean and yet they come to help. “The town was like that: for or against you, people helped each other out” (BH 4). This sentiment is actively demonstrated through the ways in which the people in the town come together to help keep Coral Hadley and the farm alive once she has allowed herself to realise that her husband and sons have all drowned. She gives up in despair, but she is not left alone. The ways in which different people support her vary, but their actions all evince a willingness to act according to the values of the community. “In another town, a widow’s vandu might be suggested, and a year of Coral’s labor put up for auction so that she could meet her expenses, but this was not the sort of place where people were sold to the highest bidder” (BH 15). Hoffman uses this interaction to establish community: Truro’s shared sense of community guides their actions in helping Coral.

Two hundred years later, Truro still maintains this sense of community. As a snowstorm approaches, the town becomes an encircling protection: “Then and there, the world shrank and became a smaller thing, simple as a driveway, a red wicker basket filled with bread and milk, a cleared road, a light in a neighbor’s window, a snow globe on a child’s shelf” (BH 131–2). A series of discrete images are brought together to create a sense of shelter and care. The simplicity of the objects mentioned is belied by potential symbolic meaning, the driveway indicates entrance to a home, the bread and milk provide basic nourishment, the light in the window illuminates the presence of others, the globe on the shelf is an enclosed, self-contained space linked to the innocence of a child. Brought together these images show that even though “In 1957, on the very rim of the Cape, a small town often didn’t feel small until the first snowflake of the season” (BH 131), once the snow begins to fall the cohesion of the community provides comfort and protection.

Unlike Truro which is already an established town when the Hadleys begin building their farm, Blackwell does not exist yet in Hoffman’s first story in *The Red Garden*. The first chapter presents a story in which the four founding families settle at the foot of Hightop Mountain in the Berkshires. However, as the chapters progress the town quickly takes shape and develops. Since all the stories are linked through the town, the town as a community is generally commented on at the beginning of each story. As the town grows it is populated by both the descendants of the founders and “new folks in town as well, people headed out west who were stopped by the mountain” (RG 81) and each of the stories explores the interaction of settled members of the community and outsiders or newcomers. Some of the people come through and leave while others stay, but they all leave a mark on the community and become part of, or at least interact with, its tradition and memory.

### **4.3 Canon and Archives**

The cultural memory of the towns is formed and maintained by the archives and commemorations that have been canonized in them. Certain events and individuals from the history of the towns are ‘remembered’ through the institutions of the towns:

Cultural memory has a fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose

memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). (J. Assmann 2001: 129)

These cultural memories are institutionalized and propagated by the towns. Records are preserved in the town archives, parades and celebrations memorialize important events of both the national and local past, and museums and libraries preserve artifacts that demonstrate and speak of what has happened in the towns. The town of Harvard is known for its parades and particularly its traditional celebration of the Fourth of July. I have marched in Memorial Day and Fourth of July parades many times. Perhaps the first was the bicentennial of the nation when we all dressed in colonial costumes and our family won a first prize ribbon and were photographed for the local paper. On Memorial Day I remember listening to the veterans give speeches by the memorial statue on the common and then marching to the graveyard where we placed red geraniums by the graves of those who have fallen in war defending the nation before standing at attention while taps was played. Revisiting the town in 2012 on the Fourth of July so that I could share part of my childhood with my children, I saw that things have not changed much. The parade was fairly interchangeable with those I remember from childhood and even many of the people watching it were the same. Many of my generation had come to visit and even some of my parents' friends who had moved out of Harvard years ago said that they always come back to celebrate Fourth of July in Harvard. These institutionalized forms of memorialization are selectively shaped to create historical memory for the community.

Celebrations such as those I took part in in Harvard serve as a fixed point in cultural memory while they also serve as an embodied interaction with the past. Halbwachs argues that historical memory

... reaches the social actor only through written records and other types of records, such as photography. But it can be kept alive through commemorations, festival enactments, and the like. ... Periodic celebrations serve as focal points in the drama of re-enacted citizen participation. (Cosser 1992: 23–4)

Through the annual celebration of Founder's Festival in *The Red Garden* Hoffman employs a rite that contributes to the creation of community and collective memory in a manner reminiscent of the Forefathers' Day celebrations of the Pilgrims (see sect. 1.2.1). Just as the celebrations in the mid-1800s of the

Pilgrims and the epic of New England history served to unify disparate portions of the nation when New England Societies were formed “as far south as New Orleans and as far west as San Francisco” (Buell 1986: 198), so too does the Founder’s Festival employ a mythologized representation of the past to reinforce the identity of and sense of community in Blackwell. The very repetitive nature of the festival “automatically implies continuity with the past” (Connerton 1989: 45), creating a sense of connection that contributes to the present. Indeed, Connerton observes that “in many cultures festivals are represented as the commemoration of myths which are attached to them as recalling an event held to have taken place at some fixed historical date or in some mythical past” (ibid.). These commemorations serve to both link the community to the past and also shape the identity of the community in the present. They observe “festivals in order to remember. What is remembered is the historical narrative of the community” (Connerton 1989: 46) as it is perpetuated through the community’s canon.

#### **4.3.1 *The Blackwell Museum and Founder’s Festival***

Blackwell’s museum in *The Red Garden* is an example of the archival process. Over time both the name and the collection it represents evolves. Initially, the Museum was the name local people used to describe the home of Ernest Starr. Descended from one of the founding families, Starr was wealthy enough to have the leisure of engaging in his hobby as a collector, and so his home became the repository of local natural specimens and books as Ernest “was enthralled by the wonders of nature and took special delight in amassing information no one else had” (RG 42). His collection grows over the years and comes to include objects owned by the founders as well. Eventually it becomes the Blackwell History Museum and fills the entire house. The museum is visited by local school children and tourists, and it is also shown to newcomers. A gift shop is eventually added and the museum quietly continues to exist. During the Depression it is shut and later, when funding is short, the cottage in the yard is rented out, but somehow the museum continues to survive.

An example of how the collections and survival of the museum have been made possible is given when a skeleton (later identified as that of a bear) is found in the garden at the back of the house the Bradys first built when the town was founded. The women of the board of trustees come to Louise Partridge, the last direct descendant of Hallie Brady. “The museum ladies informed Louise that due



to the potential historical nature of the finding on her property, they would like to have the skeleton on permanent display in the Blackwell Museum” (RG 252). When Louise gives them a vaguely negative answer, the response reveals the tenacity of the ladies who run the museum. ““What gets found in Blackwell stays in Blackwell,” Alegra Mott said. ‘You of all people should understand that’” (RG 253). Hoffman makes it clear how the museum trustees view the role of the museum in the town as well as how the museum’s collection is selected and acquired. The situation is ironic not only because of the current relationship between the characters but also because of who they are descended from and how the skeleton relates to those ancestors. None of the women involved are aware that in digging up the skeleton a hidden element of the founders’ survival has been unearthed. Ironically, if the skeleton were to be placed in the museum, a lost social memory would be entered into the archives; a physical resurfacing would occur without comprehension of its significance. As it is, Louise reburies the bear’s bones once she realizes that they had private meaning. “She wished her mother and aunt had told her the truth about the garden, why it was best left undisturbed. The creature that had been buried here had belonged to someone, been loved” (RG 256). Louise’s actions reveal that some memories are not meant to be canonized.

The most tangible way in which the history of Blackwell is commemorated is in the annual celebration of Founder’s Festival. “Festivals and pageants are community performances increasingly used to highlight the historical identity of places” (Dwyer & Alderman 2008: 174). They bring communities together and strengthen their cohesion through celebrations and re-enactments of a shared past creating a collective identity for the community. “For a group or nation to have a collective identity, it has to have a shared narrative of the past, an agreed acceptance of all those events which have formed the group over time, including knowledge of the group’s origins” (McDowell 2009:61). Held in August, the Founder’s Festival in Blackwell is central to the town’s narrative as it combines a celebration of Hallie Brady and a play about the drowning of Amy Starr.

Hallie Brady was the wife of the man who talked three other families into joining them in setting up a new town in the Berkshires. The plan was poorly made and the families found themselves freezing and starving to death the first winter. It was only through the efforts and ingenuity of Hallie that any of them stayed alive. The oldest child at the time became the mayor of the town years later, and he was the one who established the celebration of Founder’s Festival in Hallie’s honor. However, Hallie was a very private woman and so even though

her memory was celebrated, her own story—related to the bear’s skeleton—was lost. Nevertheless, her name became central to the origins of the town to the extent that when Louise called the police when she first found bones in her garden 200 years later, the chief said to the officer he sent over, “She’s related to Hallie Brady. Be nice” (RG 243). Hoffman uses this casual mention of Hallie to indicate the place she holds in the memory of Blackwell.

One of the highlights of the Founder’s Festival is the annual performance of a play staged by the drama society “about the plight of a local ghost called the Apparition” (RG 140). The play re-enacts the event of 1816 when Ernest Starr’s six-year-old daughter, Amy, drowned in Eel River. It is not made clear why this particular event should be publicly commemorated, but Amy’s ghost is periodically seen by members of the community and lives on in legend for those who have not personally seen the Apparition as well. Also, Amy disappeared at a time when unseasonable cold had ruined planting and there was fear of famine in the town. Despite their worries, when the meetinghouse bell was rung signalling an emergency, all of the men in the community came together to help search. Despite the fact that Amy’s life was not saved through their efforts, the incident helped consolidate the community and has become one of the community’s binding myths.

Connerton (1989) argues that while myth and ritual can both be viewed as collective symbolic texts, ritual is able to express certain things that myth cannot by specifying the relationship between the performers and the performance (53–54; 57). The performance of the play of the Apparition is a ritual, specifically a commemorative ceremony, for the people of Blackwell. For as Connerton (1989) implies:

... commemorative ceremonies are distinguishable from all other rituals by the fact that they explicitly refer to prototypical persons and events, whether these are understood to have a historical or mythological existence; and by virtue of that fact rites of this sort possess a further characteristic and one that is distinctly their own. ... that of ritual *re-enactment*, and it is a quality of cardinal importance in the shaping of communal memory. (61)

The meaning of the play relates to the myths of the town, but the actual performance of it contributes to communal memory in another way as well. Even as Amy’s drowning brought the community together despite everyone’s individual worries, so too does the commemoration of it in the play. By playing the role of the Apparition in the dramatization performed at the Founder’s Festival, the girls

become part of a continuum. This is illustrated when Hannah Partridge comforts Jenny Linden, a five-year-old who is too upset to act in a rehearsal: “‘I was the Apparition when I was your age,’ Hannah told the distraught little girl. Jenny looked at her, baleful, still tearing up. ‘I was nervous, too. But I remember how I felt when everyone applauded. I felt as though I was a star in the sky’” (RG 140). Hannah’s memory of the applause and how they made her feel not only relates to the success of the performance but also to a sense of belonging to the community. The applause is inclusive and unifying for all involved, both actors and audience. This reinforces a sense of belonging to the community not only through a sharing of the past but also through the repeated experience that links generations together. When Hannah watched Jenny at the performance at the festival she “felt oddly proud and moved” (RG 148). Hoffman illustrates how seeing Jenny speak as the ghost strengthens Hannah’s connection to both the girl on the stage and the past of the town.

#### **4.3.2 Ghosts and Cultural Memory**

Both *Blackbird House* and *The Red Garden* contain ghosts that influence the cultural memory of the town. Unlike individual and social memory which can be described as bipolar in that they consist of remembering and forgetting, cultural memory is made triadic by archives which exist in a “status of latency” (A. Assmann 2006: 220). Because “on all of its levels, memory is defined by an intricate interaction between remembering and forgetting” (ibid.) memories must be maintained in order to remain active. Archival memory remains as a background but is generally not accessible to everyone. Hoffman’s ghosts maintain an integral position in the cultural memories of the town creating links to the past that bond individuals to the community.

In discussing features of magical realism, Foreman (1995) states that “Magic realism ... presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected” (286). This bond or connection can be created through ghosts who are not limited by the generational restrictions of social memory and thus can serve as image caches that resurface in the iconosphere for various purposes:

[Some] ghosts carry the burden of tradition and collective memory: ancestral apparitions often act as correctives to the insularity of individuality, as links to lost families and communities, as reminders of communal crimes, crises,

cruelties. They may suggest displacement and alienation or, alternatively, reunion and communion. (Zamora 1995: 497)

While the ghosts in *Practical Magic* and *The River King* are clearly linked to reminding of crimes and only certain individuals are even aware of them, the ghosts in *Blackbird House* and *The Red Garden*, which link to crises in the community, are made much more public through archival memory. Their appearances and the memories of them all relate to the creation of community.

The ghost in *Blackbird House* appears in the very first chapter and then reappears at irregular intervals thereafter. The younger son of the Hadley family, Isaac, has raised a fledgling while the others worked on building the house. The bird becomes a pet and Isaac has named him Ink and taken it everywhere with him. If the bird could talk, Isaac tells his mother it would say “*I’ll never leave you. I’ll be with you for all time*” (BH 8). When many of the men from the town are taken by a gale that arises the first time Isaac goes to sea, Coral refuses to admit her family is dead. She refuses to let their names be part of the service commemorating the dead men of the town and it is not until a white blackbird taps at her door the next spring that Coral allows herself to admit they are dead. True to Isaac’s words, the bird never leaves:

Seven years after the May gale, the white blackbird could still be spied. It was said Coral Hadley had tried to chase it off; she’d fired a musket at it, she’d thrown a bucket of ashes in its direction, but it wouldn’t go away. Even after all these years, people remembered her suffering. Perhaps her neighbors thought it was luck to help the luckless: some of the men put up a fence around Coral’s garden, and another around the barn. One spring a pair of sheep was left in her field. Another May, a dusty-gray horse that looked very much like one that belonged to the Maguire family was tied up to the post outside the house. (BH 16)

While the ghost brings Coral pain, it serves a different function for her neighbors. It not only reminds them of what has happened but also prompts them to help Coral and come together as a community. The ghost does not settle until Coral’s older son, Vincent, works his way back to the farm.

After that, the white blackbird is seen near the pond on the farm and enters the lore of the town, but it only draws attention to itself at times of crisis when individuals are making crucial decisions, often ones related to their relationships with others. The white blackbird does however become very active in one of the

chapters. A new family buys Blackbird House as a summer place when their daughter, Emma, is fighting leukemia. The cancer goes into remission and so the mother, Katherine, and children stay at the house for the summer while the father comes down for weekends. Walker, the older brother, feels ignored and neglected and small acts of destruction occur. Whenever he is confronted, Walker says it must be the white blackbird's fault. In her frustration, Katherine tells their elderly neighbour, Josephine, about Walker and the bird:

“Your boy's not the first to have seen the bird. Supposedly, it was the pet of the sailor boy who lived in your house. The poor boy went off to sea with his father and he never came back. But the bird did. Or at least, that's what people say.”

“Well, it's nonsense.” Katherine laughed.

“A storm came up, if I remember correctly.”

She had, Katherine soon discovered. (BH 200)

Different types of memories arise in this exchange. “That's what people say” is the sharing of a vague tale known by the locals with a newcomer, Josephine remembers “correctly” adding more detail and making the memory more real and then the story is verified through reference to archives. Josephine suggests Katherine and Emma look up the history in the town records. Katherine reads more details about Isaac and the storm while Emma comments on the dust in the room. The fact that the records are stored on dusty shelves implies that they are not often accessed. Nevertheless they create an archive from which it is possible to retrieve information.

By turning to the town records, Katherine accesses the latency of the archive and is able to substantiate the stories vaguely told; this illustrates the claim that “within cultural memory, an ‘active memory’ is set up against the background of an archival memory” (A. Assmann 2006: 220). The records provide Katherine and Emma with details such as Isaac's name that make the cultural memory much more personal: “The boy's name had been Isaac, and right away Katherine wished she didn't know that fact. It made him seem realer” (BH 200). The records also enable Katherine to situate the Hadleys' misfortunes within the larger context of the effect the gale had on the town as a whole since many other boys and men were killed by the storm. The clerk identifies Katherine and Emma as the ones

living in the house Isaac had lived in and mentions the white blackbird. It is through the ghost that the cultural memory is maintained.

Although the Apparition in *The Red Garden* is commemorated each year in the play put on at Founder's Festival making her more clearly an active part of Blackwell's cultural memory, it is unclear when her story was first turned into a play. However, the memory of her is also reinforced through archival memory. She is written about in "The History of Blackwell" which is turned to by some newcomers after they see the apparition 150 years after Amy's death, but much earlier it is also the town records that serve as archive. About fifty years after her death, when Evan Partridge, a young man who has come back shocked by his experiences in the Civil War, is contemplating suicide by the Eel River the Apparition appears. The experience is an awakening for Evan. He goes to the town records to see who the Apparition might be and finds writing in the margin by Amy Starr's name. "*Halleluja praise God she will return to us* someone had written in blue ink. The ink looked so fresh it appeared to have been written that day" (RG 72). When Amy Starr's body was found, her father Ernest the collector said that he would preserve her so that she would never be gone. Her mother prevailed and she was buried, but she remained as a rarely seen ghost. At Evan's time, the story of Amy Starr was not in the collective memory of the town, but markers of it had been archived. Evan is able to activate this latency by going to talk about Amy with her now elderly brother, Will Starr. Evan mentions details of the Apparition that help to transform Will's private memories into collective ones.

... He didn't say that Amy's favorite dress had been blue. It was the dress she'd been buried in, nearly fifty years earlier. ...

"She wasn't wearing any shoes,' Evan went on, hoping a further description might jog Mr. Starr's memory.

Little Amy hadn't been wearing shoes when she was found, nor when she was buried. Will's mother had said that in the kingdom of heaven no one wore shoes. She'd made them open the coffin so she could unlace the pair of eelskin boots the women in town had fitted on her daughter when they'd dressed her. Will had glimpsed his sister's pale face. (RG 73)

The details Evan mentions about Amy's dress and lack of shoes eventually enter into the cultural memory of Blackwell, but at this point in time they have not yet done so. Evan's words lead Will to recollect an individual memory that is personal and private. In sharing it with Evan, Will is contributing to family

memory (they are cousins twice-removed) but the memory of Amy Starr has not yet become trans-generational. Knowledge of Amy's story becomes a bond between Evan and Will and helps to restore hope to their lives. Thus this ghost is also one of "reunion and communion" (Zamora 1995: 497).

#### 4.4 Memories Encoded in the Landscape

All of Hoffman's novels demonstrate that the physical landscape can be read as a text at both individual and communal levels. The landscape, both built and natural, encodes vast amounts of information. Some elements of the landscape are particularly constructed for certain purposes and to relay specific messages while others only become accessible through study. When the landscape is approached through story and memory, the entire experience takes on new meaning; "if we go to the woods guided by memory and story, we will see a changed world" (Ryden 2001: 138). Both *Blackbird House* and *The Red Garden* provide the unfolding of the memories and stories associated with the landscape in them as the chapters proceed in generational leaps through the history of the places. The understanding of how the landscape has been shaped and altered that develops over time becomes particularly complex and layered for the reader illustrating the potential latency in landscape.

When society has lost the need for a certain memory that is evoked by a certain element of the physical landscape, these elements cease to be 'noticed' and are nonexistent from the point of view of the reference system of the given culture. In effect, the landscape can 'remember' more than the culture does and the traits of past memories can remain 'sleeping' in the physical environment, waiting to be discovered by future generations whenever the need arises to acknowledge that part of the past. (Lindström 2008: 229)

As different parts of the past become relevant, the latent memories in the landscape are retrieved and awakened. In the linked short-stories of both books the characters come to draw on both active and latent collective memories to understand their environment and allow it to guide them in their lives.

The plants to be found on the lands of *Blackbird House* (like the snowdrops and other plants particularised in relation to *The Probable Future* in Chapter 6) encode memory, take on symbolic meaning and also occasionally interact causally with the people who live in the house. This interaction and the meaning

of plants such as the sweet peas, turnips and red pears on the farm is essentially fixed and yet it is reworked to meet the changing needs of the generations of people living in the house. While the individual engagement with the plants varies, there is also a collective understanding of them maintained by the town that sometimes complements and sometimes even contradicts the meaning individuals attribute to them.

Coral plants the sweet peas while waiting for the men to come back from the sea. She thinks of them as both feed for the cows they will one day have and as tokens of remembrance. It is a personal remembrance she has in mind; they were the flowers John brought her when they were courting and although her mother scorned them as weeds, Coral thought her wrong. Each spring she planted more and by the time Vincent returns to the farm they grow like “an endless sea” (BH 21). Vincent has endured harrowing experiences since the British sent him to prison when they fished him out of the sea after the storm and it has taken him years to work his way home, but he has been drawn there by memory and love.

Over time the sweet peas do indeed serve as feed for cows, but they also become linked to love. Violet West, who is featured in three of the chapters, loses and finds love in the field of sweet peas. When her lover falls in love with her sister as the scent of the flower permeates the air she claims to be unable to smell them. Twenty years later when her son leaves for college she stands in the field of flowers and realises that she is about to lose the person she loves most. Years pass and the house becomes old and run-down. The farm grows wild and Violet stubbornly lives alone with her memories. When in her old age her grandson comes to introduce his new wife to her, Violet is consumed with jealousy. She watches the woman standing in the winter dormant field of sweet peas without yet realising that love has returned and her loneliness is about to end because of the generosity of her grandson’s wife. Violet is finally able to let go of the past and leaves Blackbird House to go live with her grandson.

The next family to live in the house, the Farrells, work hard to restore the farm. The sweet peas have overrun the garden and Grace Farrell struggles to clear them. As she burns the vines she has cleared she begins to cry. “She said there was smoke in her eyes, but she got like that sometimes, as if there was another life out there she might be living, one she might prefer despite her love for her husband and sons” (BH 133). The sweet peas raise not only private memories but also collective ones. They were generally “thought to have been” (BH 133) planted by Coral Hadley and her “presence was still felt” (BH 133) on the farm. The sweet peas grow rampant and people in Truro are aware of Grace’s struggles



with them. “Grace Farrell had stated publicly that she would swear old Coral Hadley came back from the dead just to replant anything that had been ripped up” (BH 134). Not only has the story of Isaac entered into the cultural memory of the town, but the field of sweet peas on the farm has also helped a collective memory of Coral Hadley remain in the canon. In looking across the field of sweet peas, many find their perception altered “there was a haze over everything, as though this were already the past” (BH 169). The sweet peas create a haze that it is difficult to physically see through but is nonetheless revealing. When Grace watches her younger son Jamie cross the field and disappear into the wintery blue she “felt a catch in her throat ... A moment of realizing exactly how lucky she was, of being grateful she was not Coral Hadley, that her own son was not out on the ocean” (BH 139–40). Even though Grace sometimes thought of a different life with sweet pea smoke raising memories from her past, they also remind her of a much more distant past encoded in the cultural memory of the town through the sweet peas that Coral Hadley had brought into the landscape. Coral planted them for memory and that is what they grew to contain even as her individual, private memories became part of the collective memory of the town through the visible reminder of the sweet peas.

Often paired with the sweet peas in the book, there is a red pear tree that grows in front of the Blackbird House and dominates the landscape. The tree was first planted at the request of a young woman so consumed by pain when all of Blackbird Hill caught fire and her parents died that she could not bring herself to care for anything but her cows. Some of the women in the town take her to Blackbird House in the hopes that she will be able to work through her grief there. She sends the owner of the farm on a quest when he offers her anything she wants. She asks for a pear tree that would bear fruit the color of blood. The tree gives her hope that eventually leads to love and brings her back into the world. The pear tree and its fruit, along with the sweet peas, become a feature of the landscape encoding the past. The pears are described as “the color of blood that can’t be washed away and of things that can never be undone” (129). Thus the tree is a visible reminder of the past, both individual and shared. It is interesting that when she was young Josephine—who years later spoke of Isaac Hadley and what she remembered to Emma’s mother, Katherine—particularly liked picking the sweet peas and eating the pears from her neighbors. The tree, which had stood for generations, is chopped down by people who lived in the house before Emma’s parents bought it after their son hangs himself from the tree. It is

removed from the landscape, altering it, but some of the memories are maintained by Josephine who is able to share these collective memories with newcomers.

Unlike the sweet peas and red pears which are a visible presence in the landscape and have come to encode memory, the turnips Coral Hadley plants while waiting for her men to come back are forgotten. When they began building the farm, John Hadley dreamed of farming turnips. He spoke of how hardy and easy to grow they are and people in town laughed at him. The night of the gale as John sat in his boat between his sleeping sons the scent of turnips came to him reminding “him of everything he had to lose” (BH 11). Coral planted the farm while trying to stave off her loss but once the white blackbird came she gave in to grief and one of her neighbours took care of the turnips for her. A remarkable crop of turnips grew and Coral left them by the roadside for people to buy. The turnips were particularly large and sweet and brought men to tears. People paid extra for them and Coral was able to survive. The fields of sweet peas and turnips became a place of loss and memory for the townspeople.

A few generations later, when Garnet Wynn, the girl who lives in the house, goes to hide something in the field at night after her father’s death, she digs up a ruby. At first she expects to uncover turnips, but when she sees the ruby she remembers her father once talking about the sailor who had drowned. “Afterward, it was said, sailors’ wives came here and gave offerings, whatever was most precious, to ensure their husbands’ good fortune” (BH 49) her father had told her. For her neighbours, the turnips had symbolized Coral’s loss and the burying or hiding of treasure was a shared but private act that slowly disappeared and became forgotten. However, it remained latent and resurfaced for Garnet who was reminded of it as she unwittingly re-enacted the hiding of that which is most precious in order to protect herself and her sister (cf. A. Assmann 2010). As she buries her mother’s last tie to her father, Garnet finds more hidden gems. They enable her to turn her life around and pull her mother away from the crippling loss of her husband.

The turnips in the field are only mentioned in passing in other stories, but in the final chapter of *Blackbird House* Hoffman has them resurface. Emma, now adult and feeling no more substantial than a ghost, returns to her childhood summer house and finds a row of turnips growing in the sweet pea field. “Even forgotten things grew” (BH 222); the turnips are latent in the landscape. Johnson (2006) posits that “*resurfacing* on the temporal axis ... brings a new meaning to the images that are carried over. The resurfacing of the image systems ... takes on a new set of resonances from its recontextualisation” (17). The forgotten turnips

in the garden are a part of the image system of Blackbird House that resurfaces when Emma unearths them and her use of them gives them more layers of meaning. Emma uses some to make a soup but she and her friend are unable to eat it as a single spoonful makes them burst into tears. “Crying turnips, truth-teller’s turnips, sweet, but somewhat difficult to eat. Emma had the feeling that if she took another spoonful she’d soon be under some sort of spell” (BH 218). The soup is poured down the drain, but Emma finds more turnips. She stays at the farm when her friend leaves and as she prepares the turnips for chutney she thinks about the past and the loss of who she could have been had she not had leukemia as well as her loss now of a sense of who she is. She is interrupted by a young boy in the yard who begins to remind her of the feelings she has all but forgotten and the book ends as they go in to the house to prepare the turnip chutney together. The latency of the turnips in the landscape becomes activated for Emma and the boy (cf. Lindström 2008: 229). Through the act of making the chutney together they are engaged in an embodied act of resurfacing and Hoffman is able to highlight the myth that has grown around Coral Hadley.

#### **4.5 Mythmaking**

The cultural memories of the towns are reinforced through formal institutions such as the Blackwell Museum and the Truro archives, commemorations such as the celebration of Founder’s Festival, the activities of the white blackbird and the Apparition and through the landscape itself. All of these serve to keep the stories and gossip of the communities alive and remind the people living in the towns of the past. “The refusal to lay the past to rest, the reduction of history to timelessness, and the idea that past histories endure as a living force in the present: all [are] hallmarks of *myth*” (Leerssen 1997a: 10). In both *Blackbird House* and *The Red Garden* Hoffman links together a series of stories that show events and then reveal their development into myths. Indeed, Hoffman has stated that exploring this process was one of her purposes in writing *The Red Garden*: “I wanted to experience the process of how a town mythology is formed, how stories add to our shared knowledge and how the ‘ghosts’ of the past continue to resonate in our lives long after they’re gone” (Donsbach 2011). Thus, she uses the linked short stories of the book to explore the evolution of personal moments into unifying myths for the town over time:

But I thought what was interesting was that for me what happened kind of naturally and I think this happens really in small towns or in history is that what starts out as very intimate and personal becomes history and then becomes mythology. ... I just thought it's so interesting how things morph in a town and how things change. (Kenower 2011)

In memory studies myth is “an idea, an event, a person, a narrative that has acquired a symbolic value and is engraved and transmitted in memory” (A. Assmann. 2008: 68). Thus, collective memories such as those carried by the ghosts and natural landscape become myths. These myths are perpetuated and maintained by the towns and serve to reinforce a sense of community and attachment to it. At the same time myth, unlike rituals, has room for variance (Connerton 1997: 57). “The power of myth is its multivocality—its ability to encompass contradictory interpretations and purposes” (Kubal 2008: 2) which, in terms of a sense of community, can be viewed as a strength as the malleability of myth enables it to unify variant groups. As Jan Assmann (1992) writes, “myth is the most important medium for ‘imagination’ of community” (quoted in Šuber [2006]: 42). Hall (1995) posits that Anderson’s ([1983] 1991) argument about all communities being imagined does not imply “that communities do not exist, or that we cannot analyse the institutions, social relations and material artifacts that hold communities together” (182). Through collective memory and the institutions and artifacts that create the physical landscape the members of a community share an understanding and sense of community. These sorts of understandings come out of cultural imaginings and in today’s rapidly changing world many people seem to feel a need for communal attachment (Hall 1995: 200–201). “Forms of collective experience in modernity can be discursively elaborated through mythical forms” (Chaney 1997: 149) allowing the experience of authentication and attachment through the sharing of myth.

#### **4.5.1 The Myth of the Hadleys**

The central myth in *Blackbird House* involves the story of the Hadleys who first built the house. Looking back to the past to provide stories as fodder for mythology rather than fabricating new memories is optimal as “the main feature that characterizes a mythological mode of perception has long been recognized as the blurring of the distance between past and present” (Šuber 2006). Drawing on

the past and actively remembering it in the present gives a community narratives around which to build a shared, multi-vocal identity. Confino (1997) writes that

collective memory is an exploration of a shared identity that unites a social group, be it a family or a nation, whose members nonetheless have different interests and motivations. And ... the crucial issue in the history of memory is not how a past is represented but why it was received or rejected. (1390)

Coral Hadley's story is remembered and shared more than two hundred years after her death. She was not the only woman widowed when her husband drowned at sea nor was she even the only one who lost husband and sons to that particular gale. So what is it that Hoffman thinks is so compelling about her story that she enters it into the mythology of the town?

Perhaps one of the main reasons why Coral's fate caught the imagination of her neighbors at the time was because the family was in the process of pulling away from the ocean. The farm house had just been built and the Hadley men were going out for the last time. Also, Isaac was meant to be going out for his first time—except for him it was supposed to be the only time because, after that, the farm would provide their livelihood and there would be no need for him to risk himself out on the water. The disruption of all of these plans brought out the strengths of the community as people helped Coral make the farm productive. At the same time the ghost of Isaac's blackbird served as a visible reminder of both loss and loyalty, and "people took to leaving out food for the crow as well, crumb cakes and molasses bread, for such were said to be good luck" (BH 16). Once Vincent returns it becomes clear that there is hope in Coral's tale as well as loss and women come to bury a treasured possession in the field of sweet peas and turnips in hope of the safe return of their men.

The Hadleys' story is carried beyond Coral's generation by the white blackbird, the sweet peas and the house itself which all serve as image caches within the iconosphere. When Katherine turns to the town records to find out about the ghost and encounters Isaac's name the detail, as noticed earlier, triggers her imagination. "It made him seem realer, a boy who had run down the twisted steps from the second floor every morning, who swept out the summer kitchen on hot days, who could catch a bluefish in seconds flat" (BH 200). For Katherine, living in the house adds a level of imaginative embodiment that pulls the story out of myth and into experience. For others the story remains myth. The myth as it is shared within the community changes with time sometimes bringing Isaac into focus as the story of the ghost fluctuates between that of the blackbird and that of

a sailor who haunts the farm and sometimes Coral is featured in her relationship to plants. But true to all the interpretations of the Hadleys is the blurring of time leading to the creation of a connection between the present and past.

“There are no such things as ghosts, if that’s what you’re thinking. Not of boys and not of birds. There are only the here and now, Emma.”

“And the once was and the soon is going to be,” Emma insisted.

Katherine laughed and joined in. “And the should be and the could be and the would be.” (BH 201)

Emma and Katherine may be joking but their conversation highlights Hoffman’s construction of time. What is possible and what is real are compounded and permuted by the interplay of the past and present, and sometimes even the future. Accessing the ‘truth’ behind the myth of the Hadleys serves to help Emma and Katherine find a sense of belonging with each other and within the community. Kubal argues that “the intelligent response to myth is not debunking but deconstructing—not searching for the truth of the story, but rather searching for the social processes by which these stories are shaped and spread” (2008: 167). By bringing together hear-say, embodiment and archival history in Katherine’s experience, Hoffman is able to explore the ways in which the myth of the Hadleys is maintained.

#### **4.5.2 Origin Myths of Blackwell**

Just as Coral Hadley’s story is that of the beginnings of the farm, so too is Hallie Brady’s story in *The Red Garden* one of beginning, but contained in Hallie’s story is that of a town. Much of her story does not enter into collective memory but remains private and is eventually lost. However, key traits and features of her actions are pulled together to create a narrative of the founding of the town. Even though there were four families that settled at the foot of Hightop Mountain, the festival commemorating the founding of the town is a celebration of only one member of the group, Hallie Brady “without whom the original settlers wouldn’t have lasted past their first winter” (RG 233). The mythological image of Hallie as the founder of the town is indicative of the auto-image of the town in the present.

How we remember the past tells us where we come from, which shapes how we think about ourselves today. How we remember our past also tells us who

we want to be in the future ... origin stories are not simply stories we retell that reinforce our own culture and institutions, but also these stories transform a collection of secular entities into a body of sacred cultures and institutions. By reproducing and rewriting origin myths, we are venerating our own society, and in the process of genuflecting to our shared past, we are helping to make sacred our group, institution, or nation. (Kubal 2008: 170)

Just as the imaginative shaping of the Puritan forefathers served different social and political needs in New England and the nation at different times, Hallie's life and actions have taken on mythical proportions as her ingenuity and resourcefulness are emphasized as traits associated with Blackwell in the annual celebration of Founder's Festival.

The play of the Apparition has also been added to the celebration of Founder's Festival merging the events of Amy Starr's life and death with the pride held in Hallie Brady's strength. The meanings these narratives are given changes over time to suit the needs of the community. At times this shift in meaning occurs at a communal level, such as when the women of Blackwell go ahead with the festival while many of the men are off fighting in World War II. The festival is used to pull the community together and remind its members of the need to work together and make do with what they have while also lightening the mood in the town: "there would be great fun at last" (RG 141). Also, the consolation to be found in the Apparition's final line in the play "*I'm leaving this earth, but I'll never leave you*" (RG 140) took on particular poignancy with the sons of the town fighting overseas. The myth of the Apparition has entered into the cultural memory of the community to the extent that even individuals who have not seen the ghost themselves think of her. In one chapter, a rambunctious toddler falls into the Eel River. When his father sees his son in the water "he couldn't help but think of the Apparition, the little girl whose ghost was said to wander along the river banks. It was only a story, nothing more. All the same, John thought, *Not this time. Not mine*" (RG 260). John is well versed in the history of the town, but the fact that he thinks of the Apparition and her tale in this emergency is indicative of how strongly her tale figures in the mythology of the town.

Another myth directly related to the well-being of Blackwell has arisen around an apple tree planted there by Johnny Appleseed. Hoffman draws a figure known to the mythology of the New England region into her text creating a link between the imagined town and the cultural imaginings of the region. Hoffman

actually writes that Johnny Appleseed plants an entire orchard of apple trees in Blackwell, but there is one tree that is highlighted. It is a small, withered specimen of its kind and modestly stands in the field, but its appearance belies its position in the cultural memory of the town. In the penultimate tale of Blackwell set in the 1980s the lore of the tree is still part of cultural memory and the mythical significance of the tree's well-being is enumerated.

People in the town said the big house had a buried history, just as they swore that Johnny Appleseed himself had planted the twisted old tree out in Band's Meadow—a local variety known as the Blackwell Look-No-Further, perfect for cider and pies. In the old days people had called this apple tree the Tree of Life and had insisted that the town of Blackwell would last as long as the tree did. There were still several cuttings, now grown into tall trees, all over town. They were extras, just in case the original should suffer from blight or be struck by lightning. No one was taking chances. (RG 232)

The final sentence shows that even though the myth is attributed to the old days, it is still acted upon. The oral traditions related to the myth can be traced backwards in time through the different stories in the book to see how it is developed and maintained as a collective memory. In 1935 a newspaper man comes to Blackwell as part of a WPA oral history project. He hears about the tree and is looking at it when an old woman stops to tell him that one year the tree had bloomed and bore fruit when all other crops failed and the fruit of the tree had kept the citizens of Blackwell from starving. "The old woman's grandmother had been there and seen the boughs bloom with her very own eyes as the snow was falling in heaps" (RG 119). The woman shares a family tale and it is written down. The tale is already part of the local cultural memory, but now it is also being archived within a wider context. The event that spurs the tale is actually linked to the Apparition. It is during the storm in 1816 that kills the crops that Amy Starr drowns, and her funeral service is held under "the one tree that had managed to bloom in that cold season" (RG 54). Both of these events help to maintain the blooming of the tree in cultural memory.

The tree is also protected by law. "For decades a town bylaw forbade defacing the tree, but at night people took cuttings. They secretly planted saplings in their yards, wrapping the tender bark in burlap to ward off the cold. Such thievery was meant to protect the future of the town, which people said would flourish as long as the Tree of Life did" (RG 27). This connection between the tree and the town is more than that of a sure supply of apples. The fruit of the tree



is named the Blackwell Look-No-Further because “once you’d come to Blackwell and tasted these apples, you would never need go anywhere else. If the whole world beckoned, you’d still be happy enough to spend your life in this small valley in Massachusetts” (RG 27–8). Thus the tree also serves an attaching function with its fruit that invites the individual to come, stay and partake of the community. Like the commemoration of Hallie Brady and the warnings of the Apparition, the myth of the tree provides an anchoring point to the early history of the town while also providing a sense of belonging to the community in the present.

### **4.5.3 The Red Garden**

The garden behind the Partridge house has been a part of the landscape in Blackwell since the first summer of settlement when Hallie Brady planted it. And as the title of the book implies, this garden carries particular significance. However, the memories connected with the garden are mostly of a personal, individual nature. Some of them have become central to family memory, and there are times when other people in the community also speak of the garden, but for the most part the garden serves as a place of solitude, solace and searching to find oneself for the various generations of Hallie Brady’s descendants. The name of the garden is related to both the color of the soil and the remarkable fact that everything that grows in it becomes red. “The family lore insisted that only red plants would grow in this stretch of ground. Even those blooms that went in as white or pink or blue turned in a matter of weeks” (RG 62). This redness in the plants grown in the garden is a visual reminder of events that occurred in the garden during Hallie’s life and yet even the family lore has lost the memory of the cause of the redness although a sense of it remains.

For the people of Blackwell, the red soil of the garden assumes different meanings for different circumstances. For a young man come home after being wounded in war the lore is that the red soil is “said to be lucky for fish but unlucky for love” (RG 74) while the young woman widowed by the same war is told “*Where blood has fallen the ground aches but the fruit is sweet*—that’s what the old women in town vowed” (RG 75). When Hannah takes to distributing her tomatoes from the garden when most everything is scarce during the Second World War, “[a] rumor began that if Hannah Partridge came to your door with her wicker basket, your wish would be granted” (RG 138). For the residents of

Blackwell the garden is a place of both love and pain although they are not partial to the family history of how this came to be.

The garden was begun by Hallie the first summer, but when she gave birth to twins in the fall, the little girl was fine but the boy soon died and Hallie buried him in the garden so that he would always be near. She neglected the baby girl and mourned in what “should have been a garden but was now a graveyard” (16) until the bear she had befriended the preceding winter came to be with her there. Finding comfort in the bear, Hallie reclaimed her daughter and took up her life again. Over the years she filled the garden with many plants. Some were ones she had seen as a child growing in the nice gardens in England and she was willing to go to quite some effort in order to acquire them for her garden. In doing so, Hallie was following the actions of other pioneer women as described by Kolodny (1984) “immigrant women, brought ... seeds and cuttings from the landscapes ... known earlier. ... to make a home of the place, both needed to be implanted on the alien soil. Physically *and* imaginatively, in short, the pioneer women of America *carried their roots with them*” (53). In bringing these English plants into her garden Hallie was creating a home for herself that was connected to bright individual memories from her past. Her garden also reflected her rootedness to her new home: “But she also liked local varieties that she found on the mountain: trout lilies, wood violet, ferns. Anything wild would do” (22–3). Hallie turns to her garden as a sheltering place in which she can hide from the pressures of family and community. At times even this is not enough and she takes off onto the mountain for days. The last time she sits in the garden is in the company of the now elderly bear she befriended the first winter in Blackwell. Her son-in-law, Harry Partridge, sees them and shoots the bear. Hallie runs off in grief never to be seen again. The villagers want to use the bear’s pelt and meat but Harry insists on burying it in the garden. From then on, anything that grows in the garden turns red.

Hallie is not the only one to turn to the garden to find solitude and comfort. Her descendants also do so. Hanna Partridge in her loneliness grows vast quantities of tomatoes in the garden and becomes famous for them even as her fingers and skin turn red. As a confused teenager hiding a secret, Kate “went into the garden to be alone” (RG 162) and years later her daughter, Louise, remembers glancing “out her window at night to spy her mother out in the garden amid the green shadows. Louise had never even asked her why she was out there at such a late hour” (RG 231). Kate turns to the garden over the years and her need for privacy is respected.

Sometimes, people work in the garden to find themselves. From Amherst, a fictionalized Emily Dickinson wanders into Blackwell just before going into seclusion and refashions the garden in a single night. She plants a scent garden for a young man going blind that he sees as “the flash of scarlet, the trail of blood, the inside story of who she was” (RG 66). Emily plants the garden in secret as a private act and yet in the process her narrative is encoded in the landscape laying bare her most private emotions for the viewer able to decipher it. Louise’s son James returns to Blackwell after trying to lose himself for years in New York City and works in the garden obsessively “He was trying to figure out what to do next” (269). But it is Louise herself whose attempt to find direction in the garden is the most developed in the book.

Although Louise was born and raised in Blackwell she had always felt like an outsider. Her parents had sent her to a private school in another town and she had never participated in community events aside from a few celebrations of Founder’s Festival. When she dropped out of college and came home to be with her dying mother she returned to the family home which she then inherited when her mother died. But as Tuan (1975) argues “the communal past is not truly one’s own past unless history extends without break into personal memories; and neither is vividly present unless objectified in things that can be touched, that is, directly experienced” (164). Because Louise had been raised as an outsider in Blackwell she had failed to learn the tales that created the mythology of the town nor could she access its cultural landscape. “Living in the old Brady house, Louise simultaneously had the feeling of being at home and also being in a foreign land” (233). Louise lacks a sense of attachment to the place and at a loss for what to do she decides to tackle the garden, to alter and experience the landscape by writing herself into it.

She had decided to replant the back garden, the half acre of land her mother and great-aunt Hannah had always told her was of no use. They’d always insisted that whatever was planted there would grow into the opposite of what anyone expected, almost as if the earth had a mind of its own. (RG 230)

It is clear that Louise has some awareness of the family lore related to the garden, but it is only partial. She knows that the garden is special in some essential way, but she does not understand the ‘mind’ of the garden and is completely surprised when the plants she puts in turn red. Just as she is divorced from the cultural memories of the town, she is also separated from the familial memories. She does not even know that Hannah and Kate’s mother stopped using the garden when

they found some bones in it and knowing that “there were rumors that this area had once been a burying ground” (RG 167) they decided to forsake the garden. For them, even the vague awareness of the past that remained in collective memory was enough for them to act upon.

Familial memory is written into the landscape and as the plants turn red Louise begins to discover the memory written into the garden. Ryden writes about an experience he had when walking through woods that had grown over an abandoned farm with a student and the student’s grandfather who had lived and worked on the farm thirty years earlier. He writes that even as the old man marvelled at the changes in the landscape “the past landscape remained clearly present in his mind” (Ryden 2001: 154) and his grandson also knew the old landmarks “indicating that they were part of a family tradition as well as an individual memory and suggesting the quiet and insistent power of the meanings that were lodged in this landscape for at least a few of its viewers” (ibid. 155). For many of the Brady descendants the awareness of family tradition influences their interaction with the garden. When Louise uncovers bones, her reaction is very different from her mother’s and aunt’s because of her ignorance of family tradition. When the bear’s skeleton has been excavated and assembled she realised that it had been intentionally buried there and decided to rebury it rather than send it off to be studied or donate it to the Blackwell Museum. “She wished her mother and aunt had told her the truth about the garden, why it was best left undisturbed” (RG 256). She apprehends that her isolation has not only been from the social community of the town but also from the traditions of the family. Nevertheless, like Harry Partridge who first refused to give the bear to the town, she realises that some things remain private within the family and are not to be shared with the entire town.

Years later, her memory of that time has changed. She has married the police officer who first came to investigate when she called the station, paranoid about the bones in her garden. She has become integrated into the community and learned its cultural memories. Her later experiences altered her memories to the extent that she told her son “she’d always imagined the plants turned red because everything she’d felt had gone into them. She couldn’t hide her love away and so there it was for all to see” (RG 268). Her grounding in the community has changed and she has learned to view the garden as others in the family did.

## 4.6 A Master Narrative of Identity

Hoffman's linked short stories spread out over decades exemplify the interaction of individual and public memory in the creation of collective memory and the mythology of place and community in her fictive towns. "To study the social formation of memory is to study those acts of transfer that make remembering in common possible" (Connerton 1989: 39). Hoffman reveals imaginative acts of transfer that allow historical memories to become accessible through institutions, archives, commemorations and even the use of ghosts and gardens. History is contained in the natural, built and cultural landscape and is accessed through memory.

*History* turns into *memory* when it is transformed into forms of shared knowledge and collective identification and participation. In such cases, 'history in general' is reconfigured into a particular and emotionally charged version of 'our history,' absorbing it as part of a collective identity. (A. Assmann 2006: 216)

The sharing of memories helps to shape and maintain communal identity. The myths that arise in a community shape its identity even as they reveal its values and aspirations. Connerton (1989) writes that "a community is reminded of its identity as represented and told in a master narrative" (70). History and memory are brought together to shape the myths that feed this communal narrative identity whether it be the mythology that has arisen around a single house like the Blackbird House, the stories commemorated in a town's Founder's Festival or even the imaginative formation of a puritan idea of community for a region.



## 5 Topobiographical Readings of Lived Places

The Pilgrims did not come to the New World to escape religious persecution but rather in order to be able to form a community in which they could determine and control their identity. As separatists they had in fact initially left England for Holland but found the society so accepting that they feared a loss of identity through absorption into the community at large (Cohen 2001). Thus they found it necessary to physically move themselves in order to maintain their image of who they were. The New World Puritans, though not separatists, also needed to shape an identity for themselves. Winthrop's speech on the journey established a starting point for the group, but as the settlers encountered the reality of living in New England Danforth's *Errand into the Wilderness* and other jeremiads were essential to shaping a purposeful identity for the colonists based on their specific time, place and experiences. These public speeches served for the community as a whole, but it remained for the individuals to find their own footing within them. Despite their clear sense of connection to the larger world, particularly the synchronic relationship they maintained with Europe which Anderson ([1983] 1991) describes when he writes that they "could be fully aware of sharing a language and religious faith (to varying degrees), customs and traditions, without any great expectation of ever meeting [their] partners" (188), the individuals of the first and second generation were faced with a new world—a physical and imaginative wilderness in which to work out their personal narratives within the errand of the group.

The imaginative construction of identity is situated in narrative. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, a New England identity came into being and evolved through the creation of a regional consciousness in the way the settlers imposed themselves on the physical landscape both through their use of it and their naming of it as well as through the print culture they developed. For the individual, memories and experiences are shaped into identity via narrative. Bruner (1991) states that "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative" (4). Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative illustrates how narrative creates identity at both a personal and communal level:

Our experience, knowledge and memories, which constitute our identities, are not simply given, naturally and positively meaningful, rather they must be articulated and interpreted to become meaningful. This process of interpretation necessarily utilizes narrative. It is in narrating that we order

experiences, shape intentions, imagine our futures and acquire our sense of communal historical being. (Neumann 2008: 54)

Rowlandson's highly personal experiences of the slaughter of some of her family, not knowing the state of others in her family and suffering the trials of captivity itself are turned into a jeremiad of spiritual discovery through her narrative. At the same time her embodied experiences of moving in the landscape as she travels through the seeming wilderness with her captors created a more intimate connection to it: living in a tent, working to survive and walking through the forests created a tangible experience in counterbalance to the imaginative landscape of the wilderness. These experiences were 'sensuously embodied' and as such intimately connected to place. As Karjalainen states, "the perceptions of the sense[s] are closely linked with memories of various events and situations" (Karjalainen 1998: 12); hence Rowlandson's memories of her captivity were intimately connected with the landscape. In writing her narrative, then, Rowlandson personally selected memories and shaped her experiences so that they acquired meaning.

Through narrativization separate events are assigned their respective position in a meaningful temporal whole, proceeding from an initial state via turning points to an end state. This kind of organization does not merely establish a consecutive order, not merely a chain of elements along the arrow of time, but a reference frame in which each event is related to others in both a forward and backward direction. (Neumann & Nunning 2008: 5)

The directionality of Rowlandson's narrative is more than simply chronological as she uses spiritual aspects of her experience to create a narrative framework for communal functions (cf. Elliot 1994: 263–5). Framed as her narrative is by texts written by religious leaders (see sect. 1.2.1) and composed as a jeremiad, the events Rowlandson selected to create the narrative of her captivity reinforce the ideological errand of the colony while also creating a meaning for her physical and emotional experiences that underpins an understanding of her purpose and place. Thus Rowlandson's experiences are combined through narrative to create an identity for herself in the New World.

When I was in middle school I attended a weekly afterschool club called History of Art Workshop. Our fascinating teacher Jean McCrosky, taught us history through a compelling mix of lectures, stories and craft work. The course was held in the basement of the local doctor's home on the big common. It was a



short walk down the hill and across the common to get to our home from there, and I vividly remember an occasion when I was almost too frightened to make my way home. We were doing a unit on the indigenous peoples displaced by the European settlers on the North American continent, and Mrs. McCrosky had ended our meeting by reading aloud an account of an Indian raid on a local settlement. As I made my way home the events of the narrative had such a strong hold on my imagination that the familiar landscape around me seemed to change and in mingling the present with my new awareness of the past I became afraid of what might await me behind the trees and bushes along the way home. Intellectually I knew that the settlers were disturbingly successful in driving the Nashaways out of the area and I had been taught a sense of regret at their displacement, but the emotional weight of my new knowledge overcame my body and I made a desperate dash for home. Reading Rowlandson's narrative now (her captivity began in an area adjacent to what is now Harvard) and observing how she describes the Narragansett Wampanoag and Nashaway tribes' treatment of and interaction with their captives I am reminded of my run home. Rowlandson did witness and experience horrors but she also learned to interact with her captors and see their humanity. At times what she culturally knew and what she physically experienced were at odds with each other and it was necessary for her to turn her this into a narrative in order to give it meaning and create a place for her in her lived environment.

Rowlandson's captivity, unlike my self-induced fear, was a complete disruption of her life and necessitated an examination of the narrative her self-identity was built upon. In creating her captivity narrative Rowlandson was able to take the separate events and interactions with her environment and combine them so that her personal identity fit within both the framework of the community and the place she lived.

In both *Practical Magic* and *Blue Diary* Hoffman uses her protagonists to explore how drastic changes affect narratives of self and identity formation in relation to lived places. All experience is embodied making it place related so the narratives created can be seen as topobiographies (Karjalainen 2003; 2009; 2010). In order to explore the topobiographical narratives in these novels, it is necessary to treat the protagonists as personas. The protagonists of both novels create idealized self-narratives that are untenable in the light of new experiences. As their experiences change, their relation to their lived environment does as well and they become lost. This makes it necessary for them to make journeys and alter their environments in order for them to find themselves again and create new

narratives. The experiences of Hoffman's protagonists are perhaps not as extreme as Rowlandson's was, but through these journeys Hoffman is able to explore how experiential layers add to embodied interaction with the landscape.

## 5.1 Place and Experience

Karjalainen (2003) observes that "human life is a topocentric reality" (88). All of our thoughts, activities and experiences occur in place because our bodies are always situated. Place itself is not just physical space but carries social, experiential and subjective meaning and significance for the individual (Tani 1997: 212-8). The lived places of our daily lives are experienced at a sensual, embodied level and are therefore situated in place. Some of these places come to take on particular significance becoming 'biographical places' for individuals. "[B]iographical places are deeply personal and complexly memory-laden" (Karjalainen 2003: 88). The content of lived places is biographical because the life history of the individual leads the place to be experienced as both a physical and mental landscape (Karjalainen 2009: 32). Thus Karjalainen (2009; 2010) labels the way in which our understanding of ourselves is created as a narrative through the meaning we give to lived places as 'topobiographical': the combination of *topos* (place), *bios* (life) and *graphy* (a writing, recording or description). Topobiography is "the expression of the course of life as it relates to the places lived" (Karjalainen 2003: 87) and in it "there is a triad of place, memory and self at work" (ibid. 88). It is the highly subjective interaction of place and memory with an individual's often unarticulated sense of self and tends to remain unobserved until change occurs.

In *Blue Diary* one of the teenage characters, Kat Williams, illustrates how shifts in the balance of place, memory and self lead to new interactions with environment. Kat has gone through a difficult year. Walking down the street with her sister she observes "there were banks of black-eyed Susans on the median that ran down the center of the street, and the linden trees we passed by outside the post office smelled like allspice. It was all the same as it was every summer. It just felt different" (BD 221). Here, Hoffman is having Kat make an observation about how much personal experience and feelings can influence perceptions of environment. Kat spends the summer living in and moving through places she has always known and yet the places themselves seem changed because of the changes she is going through. St. Augustine wrote of how the present contains the past and future. As can be seen in Kat's changed perceptions of her environment,

memories of the past and expectations of the future combine with immediate observations to create our perceptions of the present. Thus the ‘memory’ of Karjalainen’s triad of place/memory/self can be expressed as time. “Past and future time can be grasped precisely because it is the still more or less operative horizon of the present; it is the context within which the present (e.g., perception) becomes meaningful, the background against which it makes sense” (Kerby 1991: 21–2). Time, place and self/body all come together in an interconnected mingling, like that of the impossible object the Penrose triangle, to create the experienced world.

The protagonist of *Blue Diary*, Jorie Ford, reflects on how time, place and body intermingle when she is staying in her childhood home. “She knows every inch of this house, even in the dark ... Jorie goes into the living room, unhampered by the dark” (BD 175). Even though she has not lived in the house for over a decade, Jorie is so familiar with it that she is able to walk through it effortlessly; the embodied experience of living in the place is implicitly stored in her memory and so she is able to move smoothly through the rooms (cf. Wylie 2007: 147; Donohoe 2012: 16). At the same time, she also thinks of moments in time that are specifically linked to different places in the house. Hoffman uses Jorie to illustrate how the biographical place is memory-laden by describing how moving through the house elicits memories and emotions. When Jorie walks through the hallway she associates it with telling her mother of her engagement and remembers her mother’s delighted response wishing “her only happiness from that day forward” (BD 175). As she settles on the cot now set up for her, Jorie remembers the years of her father’s absence and how her mother let him back in and nursed him through the final days of his life. In remembering him she thinks of her own feelings of betrayal and bewilderment and realises that she still does not know what she really feels, either about her father or her own present situation as her husband resides in jail awaiting his trial. The way Hoffman combines the physical space with memories and emotions serves to demonstrate the intertwined nature of the triad of place/memory/self. Memories and expectations attach our lives to places. In moving through a lived place, Jorie illustrates the embodied nature of our relation to place (cf. Donohoe 2012).

## 5.2 Ideal Narratives of Identity

Both in *Blue Diary* and in *Practical Magic*, Hoffman's protagonists attempt to construct narratives for themselves that highlight what they consider to be a world of perfection.

Our memories are indispensable because they are the stuff out of which individual experiences, interpersonal relations, the sense of responsibility, and the image of our own identity are made. To be sure, it is always only a small part of our memory that is consciously processed and emplotted in a 'story' that we construct as a backbone to our identity. (A. Assmann 2006: 212)

The memories that Jorie and Sally shape their identity around are ones that regulate experience and relationships to fit their desired narratives. They derive their narratives from a mingling of place and memories as they create their memories and shape their perception of place in light of their desired narratives. Hirst *et al.* (1997) write that "What makes the autobiographical recollection important to self is not the memories *per se*, but the interpretation of the memories, or more specifically, the narrative told around the memories" (164). Just as Rowlandson used her text as a way to organize select moments of her experience into a narrative that enabled her to create a religious identity for herself with its Biblical parallels, in *Blue Diary*, Hoffman has Jorie select idyllic memories from her married life to create a perfect existence. In *Practical Magic*, the protagonist Sally has experiences and memories that are at odds with the narrative she desires and so she attempts to reshape her environment in order to create her ideal narrative.

### 5.2.1 The Perfect Story

The novel *Blue Diary* is a retelling of the tale of Bluebeard and this is reflected in the employment of a set of images commonly associated with fairy-tales. Lying in bed with her husband, Jorie thinks "If only they were cunning enough to trap time and ensure that this day would never alter, and that forevermore there'd be only the constant sunlight pouring in and only the two of them, alone in the world" (BD 8). Nature responds to the perfection of Jorie's world with "bees humming like angels" and Jorie's "sweet laughter that summoned the sparrows from the trees" and yet Hoffman undermines the idyll of this "brutally gorgeous morning" (BD 3–5). Even as Jorie wants to cling to the present she remembers the past and

the horrid November weather when they first met. It provides a contrast, making the perfection that they found in a life shared with each other even brighter while also enabling Hoffman to hint that the future is going to bring an end to it. Jorie has created a narrative for herself and the world around her of fairy-tale-like perfection.

Jorie's story of perfection is the meaning she has created for herself through the selection of memories, observations and expectations that she has woven into her home creating her topobiography. Karjalainen (2009) posits that as we create a narrative of our lives, different experiences are foregrounded as experiential horizons change and develop. Perceptions, remembering and expectations are all encompassed in the present making it a position of observation from which memories and expectations are projected (Karjalainen 2010). Shifts in experiential horizons lead to the retrieval of different memories from the sedimentary layers of the past (Karjalainen 2009: 36–7). Hoffman has created a narrative identity for Jorie herself that is heavily dependent on her family and home. She is thinking of her garden “perhaps the best in town” (15) when the front doorbell rings signalling a drastic shift in her experiential horizon. Learning of her husband's past and the murder-rape he has committed shocks her out of her narrative of perfection and it becomes necessary for her to completely alter her self.

### **5.2.2 A Narrative of Normalcy**

In *Practical Magic* Sally Owens also looks for a perfect world, but unlike Jorie for whom it means a world of love, happiness and superlatives, for Sally the perfect world is one of ordinariness, of normalcy. Sally and her sister Gillian also entered a fairytale-like world when they were orphaned and moved in with their great aunts who live in the house on Magnolia Street originally built by the first of the Owens women over 200 years earlier. “Owens women ignored convention, they were headstrong and willful, and meant to be that way” (PM 26). They are known to be witches and tales are told about them, their house and their garden. The house and garden serve as a physical reminder to the townspeople that the Owens women are different, and yet that difference is obscured. In writing “Anyone who dared to stand on the porch, where the ivy grew wild, could try for hours to look through the windows and never see a thing” (PM 4) Hoffman creates a sharp contrast between the townspeople and the Owens. The daringness of anyone attempting to look into the house highlights the hetero-

image of these powerful women while the phrase 'never see a thing' reinforces their inscrutability. And yet Hoffman continues: "[i]t was the same looking out; the green-tinted window glass was so old and so thick that everything on the other side seemed like a dream, including the sky and trees" (PM 4). The physical environment the Owens women have created for themselves not only protects but also isolates them from their surroundings. The ivy covering the house is indicative of their connection to the natural world and its protection of them and yet the sky and trees are distorted. The thick, old glass of the windows reveals the aged, timelessness of their lives while providing a barrier between them and the ordinary world. Sally spends her time cleaning and organising and trying to control life in the unconventional home with its woodwork made from fifteen types of wood which never needs polishing, herb gardens that grow abundantly before others' gardens have woken up from the winter and a blue stone path that women brave at twilight when they need the aunts' help to get their hearts' desire. This narrative of the Owens built around the house on Magnolia Street is one that Hoffman has Sally reject.

To Sally the world outside their home is like a dream and she works hard to change and control the place she lives in so that she can create a narrative of normalcy for herself. She tries to counteract the magic around her with logic as she dreams of another life:

... being like everyone else was her personal heart's desire. At night Sally dreamed of ranch houses and white picket fences, and when she woke in the morning and looked out to see the black metal spikes that surrounded them, tears formed in her eyes. Other girls, she knew, washed with bars of Ivory and sweet-scented Camay, while she and Gillian were forced to use the black soap the aunts made twice a year, on the back burner of their stove. (PM 17)

The contrast between white picket fences and mass produced soap and the black metal spikes and black homemade soap epitomizes the ways in which her life is different. Sally tries so hard to be normal that she moves through life quietly hiding herself from her classmates and teachers by being silent as she concentrates on trying to erase the magic from her life. Like Jorie, Sally is able to create a narrative of perfection for herself when she marries. When her husband Michael moves into the house on Magnolia Street, everything becomes more normal. The aunts accept him and "the house itself began to change" (PM 34) with the bats moving out to the garden shed, the bluestone path becoming ice free and cheer and warmth entering into the house. By the time their second daughter

is born and they decide to invite colleagues and neighbours for a garden party “even those guests who’d been afraid to hurry past their front walkway on dark nights seemed eager to come and celebrate” (PM 35). As a child, Sally was ostracised and the idiosyncrasies of her home served to remind her of how different the Owens women were even as it reinforced the hetero-image of them. She is surprised when people come to the party because her memories of past behaviour and treatment are so strong, but through her marriage to Michael she is able to reshape their identity and create the more ordinary life that she craved.

### **5.2.3 Disrupted Narratives**

In both of the novels Hoffman uses the protagonists’ perceptions of their environments to emphasize drastic circumstances that necessitate a change in their narratives. Most of *Blue Diary* is focused on the disintegration of Jorie’s identity whereas in *Practical Magic* Sally’s tragedy is used as a device to set up the scenario Hoffman wants to explore. When Michael is killed in a hit and run, Sally’s life is destroyed. She ceases to try to order her world or even take care of her children, and soon she no longer even sees colors. In her captivity narrative when Rowlandson (1682) has first been captured she is overwhelmed by an empty wilderness where the blankness left by the shock of her loss leaves her unable to ‘see’ anything around her in “the wilderness where there was nothing to be seen”. Hoffman uses the lack of colors to convey a similar emotional response to loss. Gillian’s weekly phone calls are the only constant in Sally’s life and Gillian’s words slowly help her through a process of remembering and ordering. This situation is the reverse of that mentioned in section 4.1.1 in that here it is Gillian who is reinforcing memories for Sally (cf. Coser 1992: 24). “Everything was still gray ... but now Sally began to order things in her mind—grief and joy, dollars and cents, a baby’s cry and the look on her face when you blew her a kiss on a windy afternoon. Such things might be worth something, a glance, a peek, a deeper look” (PM 43). As Sally works through her grief, she searches for new meanings and a new narrative to shape her identity (as Rowlandson did after her captivity). A year after Michael’s death, Sally suddenly sees colors again. She rises from her bed and goes off in search of her daughters “particularly sensitive to the world of the living” (PM 44). She finds enjoyment in the sensory experience of walking outside, but she also becomes aware that her daughters are now receiving the same treatment by other children in the town that she once did.

Sally packed their clothes that same night. She loved the aunts and knew they meant well, but what she wanted for her girls was something the aunts could never provide. She wanted a town where no one pointed when her daughters walked down the street. She wanted her own house, where birthday parties could be held in the living room, with streamers and a hired clown and a cake, and a neighborhood where every house was the same and not a single one had a slate roof where squirrels nested, or bats in the garden, or woodwork that never needed polishing. (PM 47)

If she remains in the town, Sally will not be able to create the sort of narrative for herself that she longs for because of the power of the story of the Owenses which has been so heavily inscribed in the cultural memory of the town, the magical world she wants no part of. To raise her children to be normal, she realises she must take them away from the house and the past.

In *Blue Diary* Jorie also struggles with the way Ethan's past comes to intrude on their lives. When he is taken to jail to face charges, everyone in Monroe who knows him is shocked. Most of them struggle with outrage and disbelief and once Ethan pleads guilty they feel betrayed in their trust, but many of them come to feel that his actions in Monroe over the past thirteen years show that he truly is a changed man and so they unite behind him. Jorie's entire biographical narrative is constructed around her perfect life with Ethan and she has created a 'fixed' narrative of identity. Bruner (1997) explains that "the more fixed one's self-concept, the more difficult it is to manage change" (156). Because her narrative is so fixed Jorie is unable to accept the depth of Ethan's deception and her narrative is unable to handle the change; life becomes empty of meaning and the intermingling of self, place and time (cf. Karjalainen 2009; 2010) becomes unbalanced. Because her embodied memories no longer fit into the narrative of self that she has created her sense of time is altered:

It is the hour Jorie once longed for, that blue hour when she and Ethan would stand in the kitchen with the lights turned off, stealing a kiss before they finished the evening's chores. Now it's a time like any other, long minutes, tedious seconds, nothing more than flat time moving forward, like it or not. (BD 122)

Time has lost meaning for Jorie. The previous perfection with its stolen kisses in the beautiful kitchen Ethan had lovingly crafted for his wife is no longer viable, nor can she imagine a future in which it becomes so once again. There is nothing



in Jorie's experience that can take the place of her narrative of perfection and she is left with time empty of meaning even as it progresses. For Jorie 'human time' "whose significance is given by the meaning assigned to events within its compass" (Bruner 1991: 6) has become long, tedious and flat.

As Jorie's narrative of perfection is shattered by the realisation that Ethan is not at all the man she thought him to be she loses all sense of how the past, present and future are combined (cf. Karjalainen 2006: 39–42). As Hinchman & Hinchman (1997) note "we continuously create and reinforce our sense of self by linking our present plans, actions, and states to both the future (as 'project') and the past, as the already articulated story of our lives to that point" (xvii). Jorie's story is so strong in her life that when it is disrupted she loses all sense of time and continuity. Her narrative stance has shifted so drastically that the memories of her past she has relied on are no longer able to sustain her. Other experiences from the sedimentary layers of the past must be turned to in order for her to begin to make sense of the present. One such experience from her childhood comes to mind and helps her understand the limbo that she now feels she is living in. When she was young, Jorie believed everything her older sister, Anne, told her. She was particularly captivated by the idea of digging a hole to China and falling through. It is this memory that Jorie recollects as she tries to make sense of her life in Monroe now. She thinks of it as she goes out into her garden at night trying to make sense of how things have changed:

... trapped in a foreign land where she knew neither the customs nor the inhabitants. This is where Jorie feels she has landed. ... after only a few days of being ignored, the garden has been taken over by weeds and there are Japanese beetles clinging to stalks and stems. In days it's become an unrecognizable landscape. If Jorie had been asked which way was north and which way south, she couldn't have ventured an answer, although she had staked out every inch of this garden each spring as soon as the ground is soft enough for her to work the soil. She doesn't know the geography of this place where she's landed, she only knows every moment here hurts. (BD 123–4)

Jorie's sense of place is so closely tied to her understanding of herself as Ethan Ford's wife that she no longer feels connected to it once she finds out that her husband's name is not even Ethan Ford. Even though she has lived her entire life in Monroe and has known most of the people around her for as long, she feels like she has lost all connection to them. The garden she was once so proud of comes to symbolize this loss of connection. The very landscape of a place she has

nurtured for thirteen years becomes unrecognizable to her. As she stands in it her moral compass is so lost that she no longer can tell north from south in the physical world.

Confused and in pain, Jorie moves in with her mother and tries to decide whether or not to sell the house. Nominally, she does so for financial reasons, but her actual motivations are more emotional. The house and garden were home to her narrative of perfection and with the loss of it, she no longer feels like she belongs there. She speaks to Anne about her indecision and Anne responds ““Welcome to the real world ... Herein is the place where no one can tell you whether or not you’ve done the right thing. But actually, I never did like that house. Too perfect”” (BD 168). Anne’s assessment of Jorie’s situation is disarmingly accurate. Jorie has lived in a world of perfection that she has created and sustained through her home and the narrative built around it. Now both time and place have become empty of meaning and Jorie is left with her sense of self in limbo. She realises that she needs to take a journey in order to find direction.

### **5.3 Leaving in Order to Find**

Both of Hoffman’s protagonists have created topobiographies that are shattered by change leading to a destabilization of the interweaving of self, time and place. “Such a change initiates semiotic changes, since it requires the creation of new codes, new ideologies and new memory” (Lindström 2008: 229). The meanings of their environments become lost as the narratives encoded in them are unable to adapt to the changes in their lives and they are severed from a sense of continuity:

Life is more than separate events; it incorporates the quality of duration, of passage through time. Buffeted by change, we retain traces of our past to be sure of our enduring identity. We ourselves also change: we grow up, mature and age. Our journey through these states of being, like that through the changing environment, is a voyage into the unknown guided by our assumption of continuity. (Lowenthal 1975: 9–10)

The fixity of their narratives leads to a loss of the guidance of an ‘assumption of continuity.’ Their lives become directionless and in order to cease drifting, they have to search for new narratives and since much of what their narratives were built on was intertwined with place they find it necessary to journey. Both of them leave the place associated with their self-identity in order to find new direction. In *Blue Diary* Hoffman uses geographical metaphors to illustrate Jorie’s situation:

Amazing where your life can deposit you before you know it. One, two, three, and you're on a completely different road than the one you always expected to be on at this point in your life. There is no compass when such things happen, no rules and no maps to guide you. (BD 182)

To find direction, Jorie decides that she must visit the place in Maryland where Ethan raped and killed a fifteen-year-old girl, Rachel. A journey into her husband's past is necessary for her to build a new sense of time and place for herself. As she drives through Maryland, Jorie experiences a feeling similar to that in the garden although now it is not just place but also time that has shifted for her: "only to surface in another time, as if this deserted road is a tunnel leading back through the years. ... She has always thought herself to be a compassionate person, as sure of right and wrong as she is of herself, but now she's not so certain" (BD 192–3). Jorie has lost her sense of a moral compass and with it she becomes less grounded in time as well as place. Travelling to Maryland is a journey into Ethan's past that leads her so far from home that she "might never find her way back again" (BD 196). The narrative she has created for herself has crumbled and she begins to "confuse what is real and what's imagined" (BD 197) as she tries to understand the magnitude of Ethan's past actions in light of their relationship. As she is shown key places in Rachel's life, Jorie finds Rachel's world so real and immediate that her own history seems to fade "disintegrating strand by strand, year by year" (BD 213) leaving her unsure of who she is.

Jorie's visit to Maryland enables her to empathise with Rachel. She moves through the places Rachel moved through and imagines the actions of the fifteen-year-old. This imaginative embodying of place (cf. Wylie 2007: 147–53) does not show Jorie what she should do and she is still directionless, but it is highly meaningful for her: "there's one direction of which she has no doubt, and one thing she knows for certain: she is not about to forget" (BD 216). Her own narrative is almost subsumed by the narrative she creates for Rachel after visiting her lived places and speaking with some of the people most attached to her. Rachel's brother gives Jorie Rachel's locked diary and she carries it with her once back in Monroe. Seeing the diary in her purse serves as a trigger that enables her to transcend her spatiality and imaginatively "returns her to the place" (BD 237) where she re-experiences Rachel's Maryland. This makes her realise that "some things are never over; they stay with you until they're a part of you, like it or not" (BD 237). Rachel's past has become part of Jorie's experience through her visit

and this experience becomes so dominant for her that she experiences spatial transcendence (cf. Karjalainen 2009: 21–3; Koho 2008: 29).

In *Practical Magic* Sally leaves Massachusetts in order to find a new place for herself and her daughters. Once she has grieved for Michael, she realises that her desire for an ordinary life is only possible in a new place. The house on Magnolia Street was too closely bound with the identity of the Owens women and their narrative too dominant. As she drives she decides “frankly she wasn’t going to think about the past or the future. ... She was thinking about road signs and right turns ... and told herself that sometimes the right thing felt all wrong until it was over and done with” (PM 50–1). Unlike Jorie who can no longer find herself in time, Sally consciously decides to distance herself from the past and ignore the future (cf. Karjalainen 2006). She finds a house on a street where all the houses look the same but the children wave back when waved to rather than freezing in fear. This response indicates that Sally has been successful in her attempt to leave behind her the identity of the Owens contained within the collective memory of her town. In her new place she is free to create a narrative to match the identity she has desired. She puts up the white picket fence she had dreamed of and paints the girls’ rooms in bright colors “but that didn’t mean the girls had forgotten where they came from or that they didn’t long for it still” (PM 51). Despite Sally’s attempt to alter the Owens’s identity through a physical change of place, her daughters are less willing to reject their memories of the family. Sally finds employment at the local school and becomes a responsible member of the community organizing her life to the point of sterility as she creates a bland, fixed narrative of normalcy that allows the sedimentary layers of memory to settle.

She works hard to create a life that is as ordinary as possible so that her daughters will not have to carry the same sorts of memories with them that she has of her own childhood. When she thinks about the monotony of her life she defends her choice to herself:

Sally’s children are rooted here; they’re treated like anyone else, just normal kids, like any others on the block. This is why Sally left Massachusetts and the aunts in the first place. It’s why she refuses to think about what might be missing from her life. ... Life is brushing your teeth and making breakfast for your children and not thinking about things ... Still she often dreams of the aunts’ garden. (PM 62)

Although she is satisfied that her daughters have been able to lead normal lives in their new home, Sally is aware that part of her life is missing, and although she

likes the fact that her own garden is “simple and halfhearted” (PM 63), she still dreams of the aunts’ garden, remembering it at a sensual level with its scents, lighting and textures.

Sally does not completely sever herself and the girls from the past. She is confident enough in the girls’ rootedness that she feels comfortable making an annual visit to the aunts. Every August they visit the aunts on Magnolia Street and spend a week free of schedules and normalcy. However, Sally always ends up leaving earlier than planned because of the effect the house and the aunts have on her daughters. When she sees them become too comfortable in the garden at night, when they merge with the place they come from, she knows it is time to leave. She feels regret at abandoning the aunts and the house “still, she never feels as though she’s made a mistake ... She knows where she’s going, and what she has to do ... Sometimes you have to leave home. Sometimes, running away means you’re headed in the exact right direction” (PM 54–5). In spite of this surety, when Sally senses trouble coming to interrupt her ordinary life she surprises herself by crying in the grocery store “as though she were suddenly homesick for that old house on Magnolia Street, after all these years” (PM 64). Despite her attempts to distance herself from the aunts’ house, it remains a haven for her. Both of the protagonists make conscious changes of place that of necessity affect the other aspects of the intertwined memory/self/place triangle. As the triangle is unbalanced the protagonists need to change their narratives and new codes, ideologies and memories come into play.

#### **5.4 Finding a New Identity**

Narratives are created through the selection and meaning given to certain memories. Other memories remain in the sedimentary layers of past experience and when experiential horizons change and develop leading to narrative shifts some of these memories are retrieved in order to shape the past to meet the reshaped narrative (Karjalainen 2010). This could be viewed as parallel to Johnson’s (2006a) discourse on resurfacing (see section 2.5.2) in that both involve the retrieval of memories from a latent to an active status, but whereas resurfacing occurs in the public iconosphere the retrieval of sedimentary memories is highly personal and subjective. The narrative of ordinariness that Sally has tried to create for herself and her daughters begins to disintegrate when Gillian arrives bringing the body of her abusive boyfriend, Jimmy, with her. Sally and Gillian bury his body in the backyard beneath the lilacs but his ghost is not willing to remain

hidden and enters into a non-verbal dialogue with the occupants of the house as mentioned in section 4.3.2. Gillian remains in the house and her physical presence serves as a reminder of the past for Sally, raising up different memories of the magical past that are at odds with her narrative of normalcy. She has spent years channelling all of her thought and energy into creating a defence of ordinariness for her family and Gillian's presence and behavior interrupts it. This disruption is compounded by the actions of the ghost. The lilacs his body is buried under bloom out of season and emit a heady scent that draws people to them and causes them to remember lost love. The ghost is also actively involved in the house in a way that Sally is not able to accommodate in her logical, ordered narrative. In exploring the use of ghosts in literature Zamora (1995) writes: "Ghosts are liminal, metaphoric, intermediary: they exist in/between/on modernity's boundaries of physical and spiritual, magical and real, and challenge the lines of demarcation" (498). In trying to shape an identity for herself not connected to the Owens women, Sally has always turned to logic and the laws of science for support. She has used logic to counteract all that is unordinary in the family and in her own past and refuses to make room for it in her identity. Jimmy's ghost challenges Sally's attempts to remove the magical from her life.

Her narrative of normalcy is challenged even further by Gary Hallet, an investigator for the attorney general's office who arrives looking for Jimmy. Gary has read a letter Sally wrote to Gillian in which she so clearly reveals herself that he is able to see beneath Sally's narrative, making her incapable of lying to him. When she meets Gary, the ordinariness Sally has built into her life fails her as does logic. "No longer balanced by logic, Sally is weightless tonight. She, who has always valued the sensible and the useful above all else, lost her way as she drove down the Turnpike" (PM 235). Sally is so shaken by the way Gary has pierced though her defences that she literally becomes lost in her own town. She has to ask for directions in order to find a place she drives past regularly. "She feels like somebody who's stepped outside her life into a stretch of woods she didn't even know existed, and she doesn't know the pathways or the trails" (PM 236). Just as one of the main characters in *The River King*, Abe became lost in his hometown when he no longer felt connected to the community (see section 3.3) so too does Hoffman reveal Sally's emotional disorientation through her inability to find her way in her physical environment. For both of them their sense of place is unsustainable when their sense of self and connection is disrupted.

The actions of Jimmy's ghost are malign and yet they ironically lead to reconciliation for Sally as she finally realises that she must turn to the aunts for

help; she must allow the magic back into her life. The aunts agree to come help and travel to Sally's home in New York. Although their arrival is expected, when the aunts do come Sally is unprepared for her own response. "For Sally to see the aunts in her own driveway, however, is like seeing two worlds collide" (PM 252). The ordinary world she has built for herself and the girls is incompatible with her understanding of the aunts. Over the years Sally has practiced a dialogue of leaving and arriving between her home in New York and the Owens home in Massachusetts (cf. Karjalainen 2006: 44) but she has always been careful to keep the worlds of the two places separate. The aunts are as much a part of Magnolia Street as the house and garden, and their presence in her driveway removes the distance she has created between the present and the past, the magical and the ordinary forcing sedimentary memories to arise and challenge her new, fixed narrative.

In order to lay the ghost to rest, the aunts bring some of the blue paving stones with them that were originally used to create paths in the yard on Magnolia Street when it was first built. They are a connection to the magical world of the Owens women and Sally has always associated the bluestones with the women who came down the walk at twilight desperate for the help of witches. Twenty of the bluestones are laid out as a patio in Sally's backyard where Jimmy's body was buried in order to deal with his ghost. The presence of these stones in her otherwise ordinary yard physically brings together the two worlds that collided for Sally when the aunts appeared in her driveway. By allowing the bluestones to be placed in her yard Sally begins to bring together the past and present in a new way allowing the place to physically reflect the entirety of her experience and narrative (cf. Karjalainen 2006: 45). Just as Sally comes to create a new narrative for herself that combines the world of ordinariness with the world of love and magic, the bluestones will be given new meaning or at least a new interpretation in Sally's yard. "Some of the little girls in the neighborhood will beg to have tea parties out here, and when their mothers laugh and ask why this patio is better than their own, the little girls will insist the blue stones are lucky" (PM 271). Once again, the bluestones will have meaning for others in the community, but now it is much more positive. This is reflected in Sally's own shift in attitude as she becomes reconciled to a new balance between the magical and ordinary in her world.

The triangular intertwining of place, time and self that is central to the formation of narrative identity is so strong that Sally needed to leave her lived places in order to shape a new narrative for herself after her husband's death (cf.

Karjalainen 2009; 2006). Likewise, in the face of new changes she finds it necessary to incorporate symbolic elements from those biographical places in order to construct a more flexible identity in the present (cf. Brunner 1997). The bluestones create an anchor that expresses continuity with the past. For Jorie, in *Blue Diary*, there is a need to sever this continuity. As she begins to create a new narrative for herself she realises that she needs not only to sell her home in Munroe but also to leave Munroe entirely. “What if we moved away from here? ... What if we moved to a town where we could be whoever we wanted to be and do whatever we wanted to do?” (BD 273) she suggests to her son. While struggling with her own loss of a narrative, Jorie becomes aware of her son Collie and his situation leads her to suggest the possibility of a repositioning that would allow both of them to shape new experiences and create new narratives. She is not ready to leave Munroe but she is beginning to realise that the meanings it has always held for her are changing and being forgotten.

When Jorie goes to the jail to visit Ethan after her trip to Maryland the experience has changed her to the extent that “everything seems like a dream to her now; the way he kissed her, the way she loved him” (BD 278). As she reworks her narrative, the perfect past becomes less and less tangible and her memories of life with Ethan no longer fit with the identity she is beginning to form. Ethan’s past in Maryland is so strongly woven into her sense of the present that when he speaks to her “it’s as though he were speaking to her from a very great distance away” (BD 278). It is as if he is now positioned in another time and place and his physical presence in the jail cell is the dream. This also affects how she relates to the place where these lived experiences were strongest. Tani notes that places should not be viewed as static images but rather continually changing states of mind that alter with experiential life history (1995: 26). Jorie’s state of mind is becoming so drastically transformed that her sense of attachment to her house, the biographical place central to her marriage, is lost. She has not quite decided to sell the house yet, but she has packed up most of their belongings and had it shown to potential buyers. She returns to it to look for the key to the blue diary of the young woman Ethan killed, in the hopes that reading it will help her know how she should act and what she should do. “The funny thing is, when she pulls into the driveway of their house on Maple Street, it just doesn’t seem real anymore” (BD 284). Despite the tangible reality of the physical structure, the house has been much more than the physical materials it was made from, and when those emotional connections are lost, the house is too.



Nevertheless, Jorie is aware that the home and her past might not always be lost to her. Although the psychological landscape of this deeply biographical lived place has altered drastically, the physical landscape has not (cf. Torvinen 2011). Jorie expresses an awareness that even though the memories of the lived place are currently lost to her, they may not always remain so:

Tonight, it doesn't seem as though they ever lived here, but that may change. Years from now, when Jorie and Collie stand on the sidewalk, they may remember things they've forgotten now: how the scent of grass came through the windows in summer, how the snow piled up on the front walkway, how he really did love them, despite what he'd done. (BD 284-5)

Jorie is able to think of a distant point in the future when the retrieval of sedimentary memories will allow for a remembering of the home and the past (cf. Karjalainen 2010). She is not now able to sense the house, but she knows that at some point the sensual memories of her home with Ethan may be recalled. In the present moment her confusion and pain prevent her from this but she hopes that if she finds direction she will also someday find a way to understand the past.

As Jorie lost her moral compass she also lost her sense of place. In going to Maryland her experiences helped her to begin to find a new sense of direction. Remembering Rachel gives her a direction and from there she is able to examine her own past and her past with Ethan. When Ethan finally talks to her about Rachel's brother and his possible forgiveness, Jorie has found how distancing emotion can be. "She understands that forgiveness isn't easy to give, and that without it there is only empty space between them, a yard or a hundred miles make no difference. It's the sort of distance that is impossible to cross" (BD 282). With this realisation, Jorie finds that there is no reason for her to be proximally positioned to Ethan anymore.

Jorie is finally able to reach the decision to sell the house and move away from Monroe. As she severs some of the links with the town her memories of the past focus more and more on times before Ethan entered into her life and the past and present come together in expectation of a new future (cf. Karjalainen 2009). As she drives away "she'll be imagining everything that's out in front of them, road and cloud and sky, all the elements of the future, the sort you have to put together by hand, slowly and carefully, until the world is yours once more" (BD 287). Jorie is preparing herself to create a new identity, a new narrative in a new place that will once again give her a sense of attachment to her lived environment. The narrative of perfection she created out of her life with Ethan is gone and yet

she does not completely separate herself from the past. The new town they settle in is similar enough to Monroe that when Collin writes to Kat he tells her that they live in a small town in Michigan where “the countryside was filled with orchards. Even though they had different varieties than we did ... the air smelled like apples and reminded him of home” (BD 293). Jorie’s choice of where to settle indicates her desire to continue living much as she always had, but in a place where new layers of experience can accumulate. She finds a place similar to Munroe at a sensual level that is not biographical allowing her to create a new topobiographical narrative for herself.

## 5.5 Narratives and Landscape

A topobiographical reading of the landscape is “interested not so much in the ‘real’ landscape as in the ways in which the place is experienced, interpreted and valued in the life-world” (Karjalainen 1998). As Sally and Jorie encounter explosive changes in their lives, their experiences and interpretations of them lead to completely altered readings of the landscape. Their self-narratives are heavily place oriented and the ways in which their sensory experiences, memories and dreams and self-narratives shift and alter throughout the novels reveal mechanisms by which intimate sensing works. In the introduction to *Narrative and Identity* (2008) Neumann and Nunning write particularly about literary texts in relationship to the creation of autobiographical narratives:

As aesthetically condensed narratives, literary texts are among those media that compellingly illustrate the workings of narratives. In narrative texts the interplay between narrative and identity is evoked by what literary critics have called the ‘mimesis of (autobiographical) narration’ ... Rather than indicating a mimetic quality of literature, the term points to its productive quality. Novels do not imitate existing reality, but produce, in the act of discourse, that very reality which they purport to describe. (Neumann & Nunning 2008: 12)

Hoffman’s characters are not ‘real’ people but through them Hoffman is able to explore very ‘real’ ways of perceiving and interacting with environment.

One of the productive ways in which identity formation is discussed in both *Practical Magic* and *Blue Diary* is through the journeys Sally and Jorie must take. In order for Sally to create a functional identity that embraces both the past and the present, she has to literally bring the Owens tradition to her with the laying

down of the bluestones. For Jorie, however, it becomes clear that she must leave in order to create functional narratives for herself and her son. Their experiences illustrate that there is not one solution, but different ones for different individuals in different circumstances.

Historically, different ways of dealing with landscape and identity can be seen in an examination of the Puritans as well. They brought place names and seeds with them and shaped the wilderness of New England to fit continuously with the past into the present. Their narratives were shaped by their errand of the 'city upon the hill,' but as the political situation in England shifted with the revolution their 'errand' in the New World was necessarily altered. In the face of this need to change some of them chose to leave rather than create a new self-narrative of identity while others continued to reshape the landscape physically and psychologically in order to inscribe their narrative upon it. In this, the early generations of Puritan settlers were like Jorie and Sally who both needed to leave in order to shape new narratives. The Puritans left England in order to create new communities built around ideological as well as practical concerns. They shaped a new identity around their errand, but as political situations changed so too did the nature of the errand. Some no longer found the New England identity compelling enough and returned to England while others stayed and reshaped their identity as they continued to physically reshape the landscape. Like those who stayed in New England, Sally ended up bringing the past with her as she moved from a fixed narrative to a more flexible one that came to encompass the past more clearly.

Both of Hoffman's protagonists create identities that are personal and not dependent on the narratives of the groups around them. The houses that they lived in, however, are central to the narratives they created for themselves. Although Jorie had lived in Monroe all her life, her narrative of perfection came to only encompass the years of her marriage rather than her connections with family and others in the community she has known all her life. The house was a biographical lived place for her, but the time she spent there was all during her married life so when her marriage fell apart her sense of place did as well. Since Sally always lived with the fear that the aunts would reject her, she felt that her residence in the house on Magnolia Street was tenuous and she did not belong and so she failed to develop a deep attachment to the house. With her rejection of a magical narrative she rejects entry into the family tradition of the Owenses and is thus unable to access the family memories contained in the house.

Sharing and validating memories promotes their recall; events we alone know about are less certainly, less easily evoked. In the process of knitting our own discontinuous recollections into narratives, we revise personal components to fit the collectively remembered past, and gradually cease to distinguish between them. (Lowenthal 1985: 196)

The house on Magnolia Street contains family memories, the family narrative, within it, but in her attempts to create a narrative of normalcy Sally isolates herself from the family narrative. However, as Connerton (1989) asserts “The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives, and is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity” (21). In bringing the bluestones to her yard in New York, Sally begins to accept her membership in the group and allows herself to combine her personal memories with the collective memories of the Owens women.

## 6 Written in Invisible Ink: the Sparrows and Unity

In *The Probable Future*, Hoffman goes more deeply into family narratives and examines the relationships of a family with the community of the town they have resided in for the past thirteen generations. The Sparrow women, like the Owens women, are also witches, but in their case the primogenitor, Rebecca Sparrow, was executed for her apparent witchcraft. It is interesting to note what scholars have written about witchcraft in seventeenth century New England in relation to Hoffman's fictitious witch families as they are a melding of her private imaginings with images of witches in the iconosphere. Accusations of witchcraft, though not common in seventeenth century New England, did not always lead to execution; "A bad reputation in the community combined with the accusation of witchcraft did not necessarily insure conviction" (Caporael 2009: 258). For Hoffman's Mary Owens, the first of the Owens women, her strong-headed behavior and independence led the townspeople to believe she was a witch but they did not legally persecute her for it. In *Unity*, the townspeople decided to test Rebecca Sparrow for witchery by dunking and drowned her. Hall's (1985) statement that "Witchcraft, whether real or imagined, betokened contempt for established rules" (265) coincides with Hoffman's understanding of witchcraft (see section 1.4.2) and is applicable to the primogenitors of both families, but had different consequences for these characters. The descendants of these women were also considered witches since "Witchcraft was a family affair, or so the colonists assumed" (Hall 1985: 275). Hoffman uses this idea to explore how successive generations deal with their heritage. Over the successive generations the Owens women are looked at askance and feared by the people in their town while the Sparrow women cling to their memories of pain and make it the dominant memory written into their home. Jenny Sparrow, unlike Sally Owens, reads this familial narrative in her home and is highly aware of the barrier it creates between the Sparrows and the community.

When the Puritans came to New England they brought with them ideas of magical powers and witchcraft. In his *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* (1684), Increase Mather outlined a list of types of supernatural power and examples of supernatural occurrences in order to show that the people of New England were God's elect: claiming that these examples—both good and bad—were 'illustrious provinces' of the Puritan deity. Through the essay he "introduced a wealth of occult tales to the American Puritans" (Kibbey 1982:

126). Kibbey (1982) notes that the instances of ‘divine providence’ that he writes of are very similar to examples of witchcraft and in effect Mather had “implicitly attributed occult power and apparently hostile acts to the Puritan deity as well as to the witch” (127). In Mather’s text as well as in court records from witch trials and later reversal of attainders it becomes clear that “a confusing similarity between divine and occult power was actually characteristic of Puritan thought” (Kibbey 1982: 127). Thus it can be seen that the Puritan mentality in New England was one in which the supernatural was strongly present in everyday life.

The Salem witch trials of 1692 are an anomaly that scholars and artists have attempted to explain in many different ways. Considering how few charges of witchcraft had led to convictions in New England up until 1692, it is remarkable that not only scores of accusations but 20 executions (Latner 2006: 92) are the result of the Salem witch trials. The motivations of the accusers have been explored imaginatively through literature as well as critically through detailed examinations of court records and contextual sources, and although they remain unclear the popular understanding of the motivations of the trials revolve around various questions of power. The trials have come to be memorialized both politically, with the official apologies of many of the judges, reversal of attainders and the formal apologies of the Commonwealth as well as culturally through literature, museums and the heritage formation of Salem.

In *The Probable Future* Hoffman draws on an imaginative understanding of the historical past in creating the witch family of the Sparrow women and setting their narrative in a fictive town roughly positioned in the location of Salem. Throughout the novel the influence of Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* and *The House of Seven Gables* is particularly apparent. Like the witches of Salem but not many of the others accused in New England in the seventeenth century, Hoffman chooses to have Rebecca Sparrow executed for her witchcraft. Unlike the witches of Salem who were almost all exonerated when there was a reversal of legal opinion in 1711 (Kibbey 1982: 126), the ironically named fictive town of Unity never admitted their culpability in Rebecca Sparrow’s death and so the Sparrow women have clung to their grievances.

## **6.1 The Sparrow Women**

Alice Hoffman’s novel *The Probable Future* (2003) explores the lives of the Sparrow women in relation to the fictive Massachusetts town of Unity. For twelve generations these women have lived on the fringes of the community and yet been

central to its development. Their generational familial memories are a history written in “invisible ink” (PF 225). Their troubled history is to be found in the silences and omissions of the town’s collective memory while enshrined in the private memory of the Sparrow women. In the novel Hoffmann explores how the past, present and future all merge in the Sparrow women and their relationship with Unity.

The Sparrow women provide an interesting example of how changing positions of power and shifting readings of images can lead to transformation in the landscape as different aspects of the past are remembered. The Cake House, home of the Sparrow women, serves as a sort of durable image cache, a physical reality embodying a complex layering of dreams and history. The various public memorials on the town green are a direct contrast to the memento case kept by the Sparrows and yet as change occurs these boundaries shift and blur. Likewise the Sparrows’ relationship to the natural environment is strongly connected to their understanding of the past. As the Sparrow women move through their lives they read the town in different ways as it teaches them who they are and how they have come to be, but the town is also altered as the past is re-mediated.

The first Sparrow, Rebecca, appeared in the community as a child during colonial times. She was an outsider from the beginning, and her differences eventually led to her being drowned as a witch. Each successive generation has lived in the community and played a fairly strong role in it even as the pain of their heritage has isolated them. The thirteenth Sparrow, Stella, was raised elsewhere and her mother, Jenny, has attempted to keep her from all knowledge of her heritage. As the novel begins Stella starts to learn of her heritage and enters Unity and the Sparrow women’s home, the Cake House, for the first time. The novel proceeds to explore the lives of Stella, Jenny and her mother Elinor as they confront each other and the past in terms of what it means to be a Sparrow in Unity. At one point in the novel Hoffman touches upon history, remembering and forgetting:

It is the worst of fates, to be forgotten. On the one hand there were those who became part of history, their birthdays celebrated, their lives remembered; on the other, there were those who had been erased. At dinner the other night, Matt had been talking about his thesis to Liza; Stella had overheard him say that the Sparrow women had written the town’s history in invisible ink. All he was doing down at the library was holding certain pages up to the light. (PF 225)

In describing those forgotten as “erased” Hoffman creates an active practice of forgetting in opposition to celebrating and remembering, to commemorating. In *The Probable Future* Rebecca Sparrow is one of those who have been forgotten: “To most people in town, Rebecca Sparrow was nothing more than a portrait in the library, one of the first settlers in Unity, a young girl with long black hair” (286). The story of her pain and the collective guilt in the town for drowning her as a witch has been erased and yet Matt Avery, the local historian, claims the women of the Sparrow family have “written the town’s history in invisible ink.” In studying the items preserved in the library, Matt metaphorically holds them “up to the light,” valorizing the past and rewriting the town’s narrative of its history. The invisible ink that Matt speaks of refers to a more comprehensive narrative of the past than that encoded in the town’s collective memory. It is a past written into both the built and natural landscape of the town. Houses, public and private memorialization and even the natural environment all serve symbolic roles in remembering the past.

## 6.2 The Home as Palimpsest

In *The Probable Future* Alice Hoffman presents the reader with a house fraught with meaning. The Cake House, which is the home of the Sparrow women, can be read as a palimpsest. The physical structure of the home takes on layers of meaning for the occupants to read. The term ‘palimpsest’ originally refers to physical manuscripts that have been written over without the original text being completely erased. This same concept can be applied to other physical objects (as it has been in studies of geography and architecture) as well as to the individual where a rich cluster of meanings embedded in memories and symbols can be explored. The context of culturally defined lived-spaces can be read as palimpsests. The Cake House is not only architecturally an accumulation of different generations revealing architectural developments of different times, but it contains within its walls part of the history of the town of Unity. Thus, the house can be read at different levels—by members of the town as a historical building, by the Sparrows as a physical representation of their heritage and pain.

Bachelard writes “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” ([1958] 1994: 5). Home is a much more emotion laden term than house. In “house” we hear echoes of architecture, angles and planes constructed from crude matter, a physical shell designed for specific purposes, to meet specific needs. “Home” on the other hand is evocative of a myriad of images and emotions. At its



best, home is much more than a mere house could ever hope to be, while at its worst it becomes a trap. The idea of home is often associated with positive memories and dreams, with sheltering and nurturing. Tuan essentializes home when he writes of it as “devoted to the sustenance of the body” and “given over to the hidden processes of life” (Tuan 1975: 154–5). He describes it as a refuge and a haven, a place in which to experience ‘topophilia.’ In the home, the “sensual delight” and “familiarity” Tuan referred to in describing topophilia (Tuan 1974; 1990: 247) are “experienced uncritically through the passive modes of smell, taste and touch” (Tuan 1975: 155). Thus, home is experienced at a sensual, rather than a critical level. Bachelard adds to this abstract perception of home when he writes that “...the sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thought and dreams. It is no longer in the passing hour that we recognize its benefits” ([1958] 1994: 5). The virtuality of the shelter can be said to extend beyond its physical structure to the social environment in which it is set as it becomes imagined.

If the virtual shelter is negative either because of internal or communal elements, the perceptions of the home become distorted. The home is also a political place:

Home has boundaries that need to be defended against the intrusion of outsiders. Home is a place because it encloses space and thereby creates an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside.’ The more the storm rages outside the more cozy the home feels inside. (Tuan 1975: 163)

However, when the home is not experienced as a shelter, it can easily become a prison intruding on all that the individual experiences. Tuan would perhaps label this experience as ‘topophobic’ while couching it in contrast to the more common topophilia, but the dynamics behind this emotional response to the home are more fully explored by feminist geographers such as Pratt and Rose (1995). They claim that “this way of characterizing place as home, as an unchanging stability to be looked back on, to be returned to, is itself masculine” (Massey 1995: 65). It is often associated with a fixed image of mother, a static picture of place to set out from and return to. However, this sensual experience of a nurturing, feminine place is not necessarily shared by women (ibid. 65). Rose (1995) writes that

...many intense feelings of belonging focus on domestic places: a room, a house, a garden. Such places can offer a feeling of safety and refuge, although this is by no means always the case. For many women, for example,

the home is a site of hard work and perhaps physical abuse; for some, only by leaving such homes can they find a place in which to belong. (89–90)

In the case of Jenny Sparrow the Cake House becomes a place of neglect and rejection with her father's death and so she has left it in an attempt to find a place of belonging illustrating that the experience of the home is closely tied to a sense of belongingness or isolation within a community. Both reflect upon each other and the virtuality, the imaginative shaping, of the home can alter drastically as the relationship of the individual and the community undergoes change. An explication of Jenny Sparrow's reading of the Cake House demonstrates this.

### **6.2.1 Jenny Sparrow's Reading of the Cake House**

Just as the house on Magnolia Street was integral to the creation and maintenance of the narrative of the Owens family in *Practical Magic*, the Cake House is central to the Sparrows' self-narrative. The house not only serves as a physical reminder of the past and the experiences of the Sparrows but also instructs them:

The designed environment serves an educational purpose. In some societies the building is the primary text for handing down a tradition, for presenting a view of reality. To a nonliterate people the house may be not only a shelter but also a ritual place and the locus of economic activity. Such a house can communicate ideas even more effectively than can ritual. Its symbols form a system and are vividly real to the family members as they pass through the different stages of life. (Tuan 1977: 112)

Although Tuan is writing about an illiterate society, this passage is applicable even though Hoffman's characters are members of a literate society. Their history is written in invisible ink as there are virtually no written documents left by the Sparrow women themselves. However the past is symbolically written into their very house and its immediate environs.

Throughout the novel the Sparrow women work through complex, troubled relations with their past and their heritage as they come to terms with each other and the larger community of Unity. They live in a house that has gradually grown and been added to throughout thirteen generations making it a complex, biographical place for these characters. At the heart of the house is the original home of Rebecca Sparrow:

The house had begun its life as a washerwoman's shack, a simple edifice with a dirt floor. Mud and weeds had been used as chinking between the logs; the roof had been made of straw. But every generation had added to the building, piling on porches and dormers, bay windows and beehive ovens, as though smoothing icing onto a wedding cake. Here was a crazy quilt built out of mortar and bricks, green glass and whitewash, which had grown up as though it had a life of its own. (PF 11)

Despite the keen interest this architectural marvel—one of the two oldest buildings in town, with three chimneys dating from three different centuries—arouses in the minds of the community, it is a house that pushes people away and only its residents have any real knowledge or understanding of the Cake House. The image of the house is one that works on two levels. To members of the community it serves as a physical link to the past and thus its age is focused on rather than aspects of the house that could serve as reminders of what that past was. Those most intimately connected to that past read much more in the house, but do not speak of it. Even as the house is pointed out and mentioned with pride it is done from a distance, a distance that allows the community to ignore or forget its origins. For those who actually live in it, the house clearly has a life of its own. It is dominated by its idiosyncrasies, behaviors and smells. Embodied interaction with the house adds to its meaning for the characters: the “homeworld is not just about the traditions that get translated through the myths and the stories. It is about the embodied relationship to an enviroing world” (Donohoe 2012: 22). This house serves as a palimpsest with its different layers recording different times and circumstance to be read both externally and internally by the discerning viewer. Internally, it also serves as a sort of durable image cache containing not only the memento case (see 6.3.2) and its contents but also other physical objects and marks to show the various lives of the Sparrow women.

With the two Sparrow women who occupy the present and recent past in Unity, Jenny and Elinor, Hoffman has them strive to come to terms with their isolation in the community by turning away from it—Elinor inwardly, Jenny physically. Jenny's daughter, Stella, who has been raised at a distance, also comes to the Cake House in the narrative, but her reactions are very different because she has not been raised with an awareness of her legacy; she is unaware of the auto-image the Sparrow women have of their home.

Jenny's memories of her childhood in Unity serve to both create a strong sense of community and to establish her isolation from it. Her position within the

community is clearly silhouetted against the auto-image of the community. This is strengthened by the narrator's use of the common knowledge and perceptions of children who watch and talk about Jenny but never talk to her. Even young members of the community are aware of the distance between them and the Sparrow family, which still holds true a generation later in Stella's time as she is told "that there are people at school who always believe the worst. Especially when it comes to the Cake House" (PF 92). The ramifications of this communal reading of the Cake House and by implication its occupants can clearly be seen in a description of Jenny in her youth:

Jenny, that free spirit the children in town spied running past their windows, was seriously afraid of the dark. She was prone to asthma attacks, nail-biting, stomachaches, migraines. She was regularly plagued by nightmares and, unlike the other children, when she cried in the night, no one responded. (PF 13-4)

It becomes abundantly clear that the very freedom, the exoticism that others see in her is in fact nothing of the sort. The freedom stems from neglect and the exoticism is in fact derived from a romanticized hetero-image. Jenny's isolation from the community is indeed so strong that she experiences a physical response as her body rebels against her with asthma, stomachaches and migraines.

When she grows up Jenny attempts to distance herself from not just the community, but also her own past. Like Sally in *Practical Magic*, Jenny tries to create a new narrative for herself that is divorced from the framework of her family. She leaves the Cake House and Unity and endeavors to lead a life completely disconnected from the past. The narrator reveals her thoughts as she tries to keep her young daughter from the Sparrow heritage:

What was the past, after all, but a leaden shackle one had a duty to try and escape? It was possible to break chains, regardless of how old or how rusted, of that Jenny was certain. It was possible to forge an entirely new life. But chains made out of blood and memory were a thousand times more difficult to sever than those made of steel, and the past could overtake a person if she wasn't careful. (PF 7-8)

Jenny's reaction to the pain and sorrow that are her heritage is so strong that her life becomes bitter and twisted in her attempts to avoid them or pass the social framework (cf. Halbwachs [1941/1952] 1992) of her heritage on to her daughter Stella. Jenny isolates herself and her daughter from not only Unity but also her

mother, Elinor, as she attempts to sever the chains that she finds so constrictive. As Aleida Assmann (2010) writes of the creation of social frameworks:

To be part of the identity of such a group [including, we may add, the Sparrow family] is to participate in the group's history which often exceeds the boundaries of one's individual life span. To participate in the group's vision of its past, then, means that one has to learn about it. One cannot remember it, one has to memorize it. (38)

To avoid this memorization of the past, Jenny isolates herself from community and family and becomes obsessively devoted to her daughter. She attempts to create a new narrative for herself built around her role as a mother. Central to this is removing her daughter Stella from all contact with the Sparrow framework. Groups, including familial ones, are defined by shared memories so Jenny tries to restrict Stella from access to these memories. Nevertheless Stella is a Sparrow, part of the family. Eder (2005) states that memories define groups and in groups

... collective identities occur—and depend on some shared memory. Thus the concept of collective memory makes sense when it is embedded in social groups which are identified with a narrative of their past. This argument points to the relationship of group membership and collective memory: identifying one with the name of a group marks that person as being part of it, and forces that same person to relate themselves to the narratives attached to the group, and to what the group says in that person's name. (206)

Hoffman has Jenny attempt to reject the narrative of the past and yet she bears and passes on the name of Sparrow. Her new narrative becomes so fixed (cf. Bruner 1997) that when Stella is threatened she is completely thrown off balance and forced to change. It is only because of Stella that she ever returns to Unity and the Cake House.

Jenny's perceptions of the Cake House and her interaction with it are predominantly negative. Her image of the Cake House is informed by her awareness of the past and her dysfunctional relationship with her mother. As the world she knew died with her father, the Cake House ceased to be a nurturing shelter and so she came to read the house as a fractured, decaying place that was not "exactly what it seemed":

Those boys and girls who gazed at Jenny with envy had no idea that during the winter months, the bedrooms in Cake House were so cold Jenny could see

her breath in the air, floating out of her mouth in icy crystals. The plumbing in the walls rattled, and sometimes gave up altogether, so that flushing was achieved only by pouring buckets of lake water into the commode. There were bees in the porch columns, birds' nests in the chimneys, carpenter ants at work on the foundation and beams. The house had been cross-stitched together and was always unraveling, a quilt whose fabric was worn and frayed. Things broke, and kept breaking, and nothing was exactly what it seemed. (PF 13)

Jenny comes to see the house as “worn and frayed,” full of things that “kept breaking” and “unraveling.” The passivity of the pipes that “sometimes gave up all together” is reflected throughout the entire Cake House and presented as a physical manifestation of the dysfunctional relationships, both with each other and the town, of the Sparrow women. The bees, birds' nests and carpenter ants all illustrate how nature is taking over, gradually reclaiming the house. Thus for Jenny the house is “cold in spirit” the very air in it made “unfriendly” (PF 14) by Jenny's experiences of isolation, and the virtual nature of the home supersedes reality as her narrative changes.

As this isolation becomes complete, Jenny comes to focus on the negative messages of the palimpsest and loses all sense of stability. Shortly before his death, Jenny's father made her a doll house of the Cake House. The implications of this are interesting because they reveal a very different relationship to that which Jenny embraces for much of the novel. The miniature has been carefully constructed as a lovingly accurate replica. It was built during a time when Jenny did belong, when her mother and father were both physically and emotionally active in her life and she was their “little Pearl” (PF 298). At this point Jenny's narrative identity is dominated by acceptance, but this undergoes a drastic change with the death of her father. It is not until the end of the novel that Jenny is once again able to inhabit the Cake House with any emotion other than disgust.

Much of the actual sensory description of the house occurs when Jenny is most antagonistic of her time spent in it. In addition to passive decay allowing nature to take over, the cold of the place is a recurrent motif. Through Prosaic facts such as that the hot water taps never working Hoffman reinforces the idea that “In truth, the Cake House was a cold place in which to live, cold in spirit, cold in each and every room. A chill filtered through the windows and under the doors, a rush of unfriendly air” (PF 14). Hoffman uses these images to highlight Jenny's problematic relationship with her family history. When Jenny returns to

Unity her awareness of the Cake House initially remains unchanged. Her embodied interaction with the lived environment forces her to engage with the house at an intimate level and her perceptions take on a palimpsestic layering:

she was bombarded by two simultaneous sets of images—whatever she was currently doing, washing the dishes in the old soapstone sink, for instance, was overlaid with something she had done years earlier, climbing out of the window above that same sink at midnight to meet Will, or arguing with her mother, or watching her father rake leaves into huge piles near the stone wall one brilliant autumn afternoon....In the shadows of the laurels, in dark corners of empty rooms, she could see the girl she'd once been trailing after ... (PF 145)

Jenny is unable to reside within the walls of the Cake House without reading its different layers, without continual exposure to her personal past as a Sparrow—as a young child accepted and supported by her parents, as the exotic girl envied and feared by the other children and as the youth rejected by her mother. Her awareness of these different layers is brought to the fore in the Cake House and Hoffman uses it to force her to confront her self-narrative in all its evolutions. At the same time her relationship with her mother changes and she begins to read the Cake House anew. She notices layers of meaning that she had ignored in the past—for instance the vase she had made as a child that has remained by Elinor's bedside throughout the years of mutual rejection—and begins to focus on more positive layers of the palimpsest that surrounds her.

As Stella learns about her heritage and forces her mother to confront it as well, Jenny's attitude begins to change and her relationships with both the community at large and the Cake House take on new dimensions. In her youth Jenny felt that the town watched but did not accept her. Tuan writes of being watched in a manner that speaks to Jenny's childhood experience. He writes of "an awareness that one is observed. In a small town people 'watch out' for one another. 'Watch out' has both the desirable sense of caring and the undesirable one of idle—and perhaps malicious—curiosity. Houses have eyes" (Tuan 1977: 60–1). The gaze of these houses can be daunting, intimidating and oppressive, and yet, if the gaze is an accepting one it can lead to radical changes in those being watched. In the case of Jenny, her childhood is spent as an outsider in her own village and the watching eyes drive her away. However, as she is forced to confront her memories and the Cake House her perceptions begin to change and she comes to feel that the gaze is a benign one.

With her new acceptance, Jenny becomes able to access the different metaphorical cake layers the house is named for. The Cake House which had grown over generations from “a house made of wood and mud and straw” (PF 189) to become “a whitewashed wedding cake, one that was tilted on its foundation and covered with vines” (PF 137) houses the memory of the Sparrow women and functions not only as a biographical place (cf. Karjalainen 2003) but also as a familial, trans-generational framework (cf. A. Assmann 2008). For Jenny, the dominant memory encoded in the house is one of pain and isolation that is gradually added to as she learns to read it anew so that when she finally inherits it as her own she sees it as a “house of windows and of wedding cakes, of pain that was never felt and of sleepless nights, of bird’s-nest puddings, of invisible ink, of arrowheads, of laurel that was taller than any other in the Commonwealth, of bees that would never sting” (PF 320). In developing Jenny Sparrow’s changing readings of the Cake House, Hoffman is able to use the house and its contents as a palimpsest that allows the reader to more fully engage in the character development. An understanding of Jenny is strengthened via her interactions with her home and the memories it contains. Bachelard ([1958] 1994) writes that “by approaching the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination, we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us to an unimaginable depth” (6). Jenny Sparrow serves as an example to show how Hoffman’s characters bring together the memory and imagination of the houses through their interaction—at all sorts of sensory levels—with their homes.

### **6.3 Memorialization**

One of the ways in which memory is written into the landscape is through memorials and monuments. Hoffman makes use of these at both public and private levels in the lives of Unity. The statues on the town green serve as a public memorialization of important times and people in the history of the community, while the Sparrow women’s memento case is the only tangible representation of the invisible history of the Sparrow women in Unity. Dwyer & Alderman (2008) write that the “past is a potentially contested terrain and where memorials are located—relative to a sense of time and place—plays a critical role in shaping what (and who) is ultimately remembered and forgotten” (176). The shifting terrain of the past is contested and altered as the relationship of the Sparrow women and the town changes.



The lack of any sort of recognition of Rebecca Sparrow in the cultural memory of the town hides the Sparrow women. Memorials and monuments are social constructs of commemoration that form part of the cultural landscape. As such, they do not merely reflect the past, but they serve to legitimize certain interpretations of it. Working with the idea that “what is defined as memorable or historically significant is open to social control, negotiation, and contestation” (Alderman & Dwyer 2009: 51), memorials and monuments can be examined in terms of their normalizing function as their selective narration of history controls both what is remembered and what is forgotten. Hoffman utilizes the public memorials and monuments of Unity to symbolize that the Sparrow women have been erased from the historical memory of the town. However, the function of memorials and monuments is not static because “they are also mirrors of more contemporary events, issues, and social tensions” (Dwyer & Alderman 2008: 168) and by “a rescripting of the identity and meaning of places of memory” (ibid. 168) current social needs and ideologies can be addressed in a historical rewriting of what is being commemorated. Thus, memorials and monuments take on dynamic, symbolic meaning. Hoffman makes use of the potential to use them to resurface the memory of Rebecca Sparrow in Unity.

### **6.3.1 Public Memorialization in Unity**

The cultural formations and institutionalization of cultural memory (cf. J. Assmann 2001: 129) allow communities to create a sense of continuity and reaffirm hegemonic version of historical memory (see section 4.3). The Harvard memorial Day parades I remember were not shaped by an overt political understanding for me as a child, but in remembering how the veterans dressed and held themselves, the sorts of speeches that were given and the stops that were made by specific statues on the common I can now see the ways in which the performative acts of the parade reinforced the values of the town. In *Probable Future* the Memorial Day parade is used to illustrate how the historical narrative can be employed to address current social needs as well with “the mayor’s white convertible Cadillac” (PF 257) driving in the center of it. These sorts of performative commemorations serve to reinforce those built into the physical landscape of the town. The heart of the town and focal point of the landscape is the town common or green (see section 1.2.2). Surrounded by the town hall and other institutional buildings, with its rows of plane trees, linden and stone monuments, Unity’s common is central to the cultural landscape and serves as a

focal point for commemorations that legitimize the auto-image of the town and its past.

The monuments placed on the town common in Unity are mentioned at various times throughout the novel as different characters notice or think of them. They have been erected in remembrance of the men of the town who had died in various wars. In *The Probable Future* two of them, the Revolutionary War monument and the Civil War monument, receive particular attention. The Revolutionary War monument is a dark, granite stone with a crying angel engraved on it in memory of the sorrow felt by the Elliots, Hapgoods and other families who lost their sons. This angel is used as a motif throughout the novel and thus the presence of the monument in the landscape is highlighted. The other monument on the green that is described in detail is the Civil War monument. The statue was modeled on the son of the influential Hathaway family, and it “was believed that the lily of the valley that grew at the base of the monument arose from [his mother’s] tears” (PF 156). Accordingly, the narrative is written into the landscape and remembered. In contrast, the landscape encountered at the heart of the town lacks any reference to the Sparrows despite their influential role in the community and thus they are hidden.

Cultural landscapes can be read as texts “written and read by social actors and groups within their own specific historical and ideological context” (Alderman & Dwyer 2009: 52). Thus, it is the narratives, or stories that are told through the landscape that come under scrutiny. As Harvard changed from an agricultural community into a suburban residential town (Anderson 1976: 172) the ideological concern with maintaining the natural environment of the town was reflected in the formation and subsequent actions of organizations such as the Conservation Commission established in 1962, the non-profit Conservation Trust established in 1973 and the Elm Commission founded in 1974. Aside from the numerous conservation areas and projects in town this communal value is written into the landscape with a commemorative stone situated on the common. The inscription reads “THE PHAIR ELM dedicated in honor of Anne and Bill Phair for their efforts in preserving the elm trees of Harvard.” William E. Phair worked as a biologist to develop the trunk injection method for controlling Dutch elm disease which has decimated the American elm population of the country. As a lifetime resident of Harvard he, together with his wife, formed an organization to save the local trees that just recently celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. As a child I found the pun created by their name entertaining but it wasn’t until I read Stilgoe’s (1982b) comments on the popularity of elms in the landscaping of New England commons

that I realized the cultural significance of William Phair's actions. This commemorative stone is indicative of an ideology that has greatly influenced the physical landscape of the town of Harvard favoring nature over commerce.

In reading cultural landscapes questions related to what is being said and by whom as well as ones related to who is being left silent can all be explored in light of power relations.

Cultural landscapes...are 'signifiers of the culture of those who have made them' (Cosgrove 1993, p. 8) and ... powerful groups will attempt to determine the limits of meaning for everyone else by universalizing their own cultural truths through traditions, texts, monuments, pictures and landscapes. (Graham, Ashworth & Tunbridge 2000: 31)

The reading and writing of these texts takes on palimpsestic layers over time that can be described as 'symbolic accretion'. Symbolic accretion is not only "a way of analyzing the stratigraphy of ideologies written onto memorial landscapes" (ibid. 52) but it also can be actively used by groups to raise their visibility through the rewriting of already existent monuments. This rewriting then changes or adds to the narrative being told, sometimes in ways that bring voice to those previously silenced. Hoffman makes use of this in the novel. A rewriting of this sort in a way that would bring the silenced Sparrows into the town's collective narrative of the past is not possible through the existing monuments, but as balances change addition to the landscape becomes possible. What begins as a personal tribute to Rebecca by her many-times great-granddaughter, Stella, is turned into a public tribute through means provided by the last Hathaway. Stella cuts and dies her hair with what Jenny describes as ink, "the sort that was far from invisible" (PF 267). This is done in honor of Rebecca who was shorn and then drowned as a witch by the people of the town who were led by the Hathaways in the persecution of Rebecca. Eli Hathaway mistakes Stella for Rebecca on his death bed and tries to atone for the past, forgotten by so many because it had been silenced but clearly also kept alive in the familial memory of the Hathaways, by returning Rebecca's silver star necklace to the Sparrows and giving Stella control of his wealth. With this money, Stella is finally able to write the Sparrows into the landscape by getting the town to accept a statue in Rebecca's memory; "if anyone felt that such a memorial was a sacrilege, they didn't speak up" (PF 286). At a communal level the financial gain in the present is seen to outweigh the concerns of the past.

The monument that is erected carries great meaning for those most aware of the past. The old meetinghouse had a bell that was rung whenever someone in the

town died, but that bell was not rung when Rebecca died. The monument to Rebecca was mounted by a bronze bell symbolizing that “there would never be silence again, at least not in this town” (PF 286). Thus Hoffman illustrates how the memorial landscape can serve as a stage for performance displaying collective memory and either legitimizing a dominant view of the past through commemoration or forcing confrontation with less desirable elements of the past. When the bell is first rung at the death of Elinor Sparrow it serves to both rework the dominant interpretation of the past and give voice to those who have been silenced.

### **6.3.2 The Memento Case**

In *The Probable Future* Hoffman counterbalances the public memorialization shared by the town with a private memorialization hidden and nurtured by the Sparrow women in the form of a memento case. Throughout the novel she develops a set of symbols connected to it that come to work much as the archives explored in Chapter 4. An awareness of the past at odds with Unity’s proud narrative is shown to have been maintained in the memento case hidden in the Sparrow women’s private library in the Cake House. Whitehead (2009) writes that

for the family group, the interior space of the home gives a sense of its own continuity over time. The physical objects of the home with which the group members are in daily contact change little or not at all, and so give the illusion of rediscovering the past in the present. (137)

The Cake House and the items in it are palimpsestic with different layers of shifting meaning, but the memento case creates a fixed, static point that continually maintains the past in the present. The memento case contains a few items that are associated with Rebecca Sparrow, and Hoffman develops their symbolic meaning throughout the novel. When Rebecca, the progenitor of the Sparrow women, first emerged from the woods, she had nothing but the clothes on her back, a silver star, a silver bell and a compass. The bell and the compass are in the memento case, but the star is missing. The case also holds the arrowheads that Rebecca dug out of her skin after the young men of the village shot her. The final item in the case is a braid of her hair that was cut off of her head when she was drowned as a witch by the people of the village.

The case was originally built by Rebecca's daughter, Sarah, of oak, hawthorn and ash because "[Sarah] insisted on remembering" (PF 253). The symbolism of the wood used and the placement of the objects within it—the compass placed in the north corner, for example—are echoed in the embroidery on the coverlet for the case. It is a cloth carefully embroidered by Sarah depicting willows, snowdrops and nesting birds with red stitching for protection, loyalty and luck. Accompanying all of this is a piece of parchment inscribed with the only writing by Sparrow women aside from Elisabeth Sparrow's recipes. It simply states the year and reads "Saved so that we remember Rebecca Sparrow" (PF 95). This commemoration of their family history is "handed down through the generations, preserved under glass, much the way another family might document their history with photographs or newspaper announcements" (PF 21–2). This material form of preserving family memory ensures that the memories are carried from generation to generation. Family memories "are at the same time models, examples, and elements of teaching. They express the general attitude of the group; they not only reproduce its history but also define its nature and its qualities and weaknesses" (Halbwachs [1941/1952] 1992: 59). The successive Sparrow generations do not look at the case, but its presence in the house is strongly felt and serves as a continual reminder of who the Sparrow women are and how they differ from the rest of the community.

This memorialization of their progenitor's pain is a very private one. Others in the town are aware of the existence of the case but the Sparrow women have always felt that "no outsider was ever to be shown anything that had belonged to Rebecca Sparrow" (PF 20). In an act against her mother, Jenny shows the case to Will Avery who immediately steals one of the arrowheads as proof that the rumors told in town were true. Otherwise, the case remains hidden away in a corner of the Cake House library, covered but not forgotten. The historical society would like some artifact to display at the town library, but just as in *The Red Garden* Louise felt the bear's bones should not be made public (see section 4.3.1) the Sparrow women do not want, indeed are not ready, to make their pain public. The memento case must be dismantled before public recognition of the past is possible for them. The pain the case symbolizes begins to ease as Jenny Sparrow starts to work in the local coffee shop and her interactions with the other members of the community take on a new form. Eventually, she invites her ex-brother-in-law, Matt Avery, to dinner. It is the first time in 30 years that a guest is invited to dine at the Cake House—a fact obviously indicative of the changes beginning to take place. During the dinner Matt goes with Stella to view the memento case.

Jenny watches them from the doorway to the library; “She had always thought of the glass case as their personal museum of pain, keepsakes to remind them not to trust anyone, never to forgive. Now, she wasn’t so sure” (PF 193). Her uncertainty is indicative of a changing understanding of the case, and she begins to rewrite its narrative within family memory.

As Jenny’s relationship with her mother and her home improves, the reading of the memento case undergoes drastic change to the extent that it is taken apart. The case, which has held the concrete symbols of Rebecca Sparrow and has carried the weight of her pain and sorrow for generations, is gradually disassembled. First, Elinor gives Jenny the bell when she is sick so that she can call for her and then the compass is also brought into use in order to give direction. When Eli Hathaway gives Stella the missing silver star, instead of being added to the memento case, it is worn by Stella. As recognition and reconciliation with the past (both personal and immediate, and public and long-term) is achieved, the need for the meaning of the memento case alters.

The Sparrow women have had a complex relationship with the town for thirteen generations and once amends are finally made, the Sparrow women begin to develop a new relationship with the community as its members enter the Cake House after Elinor’s funeral. The extent of this is apparent not only in the fact that people are allowed into the Cake House, but also through the description of the reception: “A few local children balanced their glasses of punch on the arrowhead case, then chased each other around the occasional table until their mothers told them to mind their manners” (PF 317). In this it becomes evident that both the hetero-image and the auto-image of the Sparrows have drastically undergone alteration. For the townspeople the mystery and awe of the room, as the heart of the shame and guilt of dealings with the Sparrows has been diffused. For the Sparrows themselves, the memento case—that receptacle of pain and un-forgiveness—has simply become “the arrow case,” a display of some objects from the past. This dismantling of the familial memory of pain and the cultural memory of shame encoded in the memento case illustrates that “some measure of forgetting is a necessary requirement for personal and civic health” (Whitehead 2009: 157). As the bronze bell is rung, the new public memorialization of Rebecca Sparrow gives voice to the once silenced past and so the private memorial is no longer needed. The pain and shame have been expunged and the new memorialization is affirmative and normalizing. In this way Hoffman is able to use the memento case as an image cache and its changing interaction with the iconosphere to explore the workings of groups and communities.

## 6.4 The Natural Environment

The natural environment both around the Cake House and elsewhere in Unity also contributes to a narrative of the past. Matt Avery is aware of this past as he works: “lately he found himself thinking about history the whole time he was landscaping” (PF 107). Because Hoffman creates Matt as a historian she is able to use him to show how a landscape can hold history. His perceptions of his lived environment are particularly informed by his knowledge of the past and working in it becomes an embodied act of memorialization for him. He imagines the movements of the founding fathers and Rebecca Sparrow as he clears away brambles and poison ivy; peopling the landscape with figures who have shaped it in both physical and cultural ways. A natural landscape is always shaped by the influence of humans and, as Ryden (2001) expresses it, “has people’s fingerprints all over it” (9). Because of his research and interests Matt is able to discern some of these fingerprints in the natural landscape and they are meaningful for him. Ryden (2001) writes that:

Landscapes are not just material objects, explicable by some chronology of events in combination with the local climate and soil, but are presences that matter in human lives; they are experienced not only visually and kinesthetically, but aesthetically and emotionally as well. (42)

Matt’s work as a historian and as a landscaper come together imaginatively in an emotionally loaded fashion and he remembers the relationship of the Sparrows and Unity as he moves through the town. His awareness is formed through his research into the town’s history, but others are not as adept at tracing the past in the natural landscape that surrounds them.

A general awareness of how humans have affected the natural landscape can be seen in the following passage where Hoffman is describing one of the most wild places in town—the woods where Rebecca Sparrow first appeared—as they now exist in the present of the narrative:

There were cinnamon ferns growing wild, and yellow iris that had escaped from Colonial gardens, jumping fences, growing underneath hedges. There were jack-in-the-pulpit, and dozens more swamp cabbages, which gave off a sultry scent if brushed up against. It seemed unearthly quiet here in the woods, but for anyone who listened carefully, there was actually endless sound. The hum of the mayflies and the mosquitoes, the drone of the bees as they visited the wild dogwood, which had come into full bloom, the

chattering of catbirds, the song of the warbler, the trill of the sparrows, who had lit on every branch. (PF 240)

The ferns and iris have been brought into the landscape by human action and have spread into areas considered wild. At a material level these plants illustrate that nature and culture are intertwined and man's effect on what is considered the natural environment is always present. The expression "unearthly quiet" draws attention to the artificiality of an environment without life in it, and so sound is used to make the woods 'real' and connect the people in them to nature. The endless sound of the woods of Unity draws the careful listener into the landscape making him or her a part of it. In addition to the sounds, the blossoms of the dogwood layer the sensory imagery and the presence of sparrows add symbolic meaning to Elinor's actions in this portion of the novel. Thus Hoffman uses the narration to shape an awareness of how man's actions in the past have shaped the landscape and as she does so she creates a pattern of growth and perception related to flowers, trees, the local wildlife and water throughout the novel.

#### **6.4.1 Nature and the Sparrow Women**

The Sparrow women have a particular connection to nature. Snowdrops appeared the day Rebecca was found in the woods and each Sparrow baby was born the day they first began to bloom in March. The Cake House is almost hidden by the tallest hedge of linden in the county, Elinor Sparrow is known for her amazing roses hidden away in her garden at the end of Dead Horse Lane which is guarded by snapping turtles that seem to share an affinity with the women, and bottomless Hourglass Lake is only safe for Sparrows. Birds are also mentioned often, but as their name implies, it is sparrows that are most strongly linked to Rebecca and her descendants.

Birds and particularly sparrows have an affinity with the Sparrow women. The name of Sparrow was given to Rebecca by boys spying on her as she stood by the lake where she did her work as a washerwoman. This was the beginning of the gossip that soon spread about her strangeness.

With her long black hair flying and her eyes shut tight, she looked as though she were dreaming. ... Soon there were so many birds, the boys could barely see Rebecca. She'd all but disappeared right in front of their eyes. Up to then, she'd had no name but Rebecca, given to her by the town fathers when she appeared out of the wilderness not speaking their language, wearing her silver



star. Now, the boys gave her a second name. *Rebecca Sparrow*, they whispered, naming her then and there. (PF 101)

Even though the settlers of the town live close to nature, they work to shape it to their needs. Rebecca's behavior is frightening as she disappears into the natural landscape and she is conflated with dreaming and the wilderness, beyond the bounds of social control. Just as the settlers have taken imaginative possession of the landscape by naming it, so too do they attempt to control Rebecca by naming her. "Naming, giving a name to someone or something, always means a withdrawal from troubling anonymity and the assignment of a settled position in the identity matrix of the culture" (Paasi 1996: 100). By naming Rebecca after the sparrows that come to her they mix the mystical aspects of her 'unnatural' communion with nature together with reference to one of the most drab, 'normal' species of bird that they have named after familiar birds from the Old World; a failed attempt to bring her into the identity matrix of the community. Like Rebecca, all of the Sparrow women throughout the generations have been visited by sparrows if they stood by the lake and waited for them to come. When Stella asks Elinor about the past Jenny has tried so hard to keep her from, Elinor takes Stella to the lakeside and teaches her just as her own grandmother had done for her. It is a private act of remembering that connects the generations of the family to each other and reinforces their sense of identity:

Stella heard them before she saw them: the fluttering of feathers, the chirrup so close to her ear, the sound of the wind, as though the sky were wrapping around her, so near it was falling onto her skin. ... By the time she opened her eyes, something was vibrating in her chest, a bird beating against her rib cage. The sky that began with her and went upward was teeming with sparrows. (PF 100)

As Elinor shares this experience with Stella, she "actively participates in the [family's] image of the past" (A. Assmann 2010: 38) that Jenny has kept from her. The embodied experience of communion with the birds physically connects Stella with the landscape and her familial heritage. Elinor, however, is not only leading Stella in 'memorizing' the past of the Sparrows, she is also bringing her granddaughter into her life.

Elinor Sparrow has hidden herself from the world, including her own daughter Jenny, in her rose garden since the death of her husband. The oldest roses in the garden were planted by Rebecca, but Elinor has added many roses

over the years and they thrive. In discussing her use of roses in some of her novels Hoffman has said:

Roses are important to us all—in a way the evolution of the rose tells the human story. Certainly, here is one instance where we have been successful in controlling nature—from the simple came the elaborate, with varieties as different from each other as they are from lilies or peas. The folklore about roses is fascinating; it's a very emotional flower, and often represents the many layers of the psyche, which is probably why it figures so predominately in so many fairy tales. (Siciliano 2001b)

Hoffman uses Elinor's roses to explore her psyche. Elinor's rose garden is full of different types of roses that are the envy of many, but she is driven by the desire to create a blue rose. She has read that it is a genetic impossibility and yet she continues her efforts to the exclusion of all else. In her final attempt to create a blue rose she crosses a magenta hybrid she has spent several years developing with "one of Rebecca's old roses, a variety found only in Unity that was said to wither if gazed upon by human eyes" (PF 74). Elinor's obsession with blue roses is fueled by her desire to complete something, to leave a mark upon a world which she has all but disappeared from. "She had cut herself off, not unlike those invisible roses which could not bear the weight of humankind" (PF 143). With Stella's arrival into her life, Elinor realizes that there is hope in forgiveness as Stella works in the garden with her. She decides it is enough to know about the rose, so she hides it by planting it out in the woods where Rebecca Sparrow first appeared so many years before. Elinor has done the impossible, controlled the crossbreeding of a rose in order to create a truly blue blossom, but she realizes that this control does not need to be shared with others or even witnessed by her. It is enough knowing that she has found forgiveness within her family. In planting the rose where Rebecca first appeared, Elinor is not only coming to terms with herself but she is also creating a private, secret memorial to Rebecca, bringing everything full circle by planting an impossible flower to bloom at the very spot where the history of the Sparrows began. In this way Hoffman is able to bring together various forms of memorialization in both the built and natural landscape to reinforce her dominant themes.

### **6.4.2 Controlling Nature**

Because the Sparrow women are so close to nature, it is interesting to examine how attempts to control the Sparrows impact nature. In writing about how nature has been perceived in western societies Lippard (1997) notes that “nature, like woman, has been seen as powerful, uncontrollable and threatening on one hand, and inferior and subordinate (though necessary and convenient) to human culture, on the other” (12). This ambivalence toward nature and women is reflected in the way the townspeople react to the Sparrows. Nature responds and things go awry when control over one of the Sparrows is misused. The Sparrow women themselves strive to control nature at times and this too leads to varied developments. The control of nature can also be seen as symbolically reflecting the situation between the Sparrows and the larger community of Unity. In an interview Hoffman states: “I think we are bound to, and by, nature. We may want to deny this connection and try to believe we control the external world, but every time there's a snowstorm or drought, we know our fate is tied to the world around us” (Siciliano 2001b). When Unity was first founded the settlers worked to clear the wilderness and create productive homes and farms for themselves. They altered the physical landscape to suit their needs while creating a cultural landscape. Rebecca Sparrow’s arrival was an intrusion that disrupted this process. Her connection to nature came to frighten the settlers and so they attempted to control her just as they attempted to control nature. Succeeding generations of Sparrow women serve as a reminder of how Unity is bound to nature.

Clearly the strongest attempts to control one of the Sparrows arise during Rebecca’s life. As the community fails to make her one of their own and she is sent to Hourglass Lake to work with the washerwoman, her affinity with nature is reinforced. Sparrows come to her bringing solace and hope, and her hut by the lake belongs there. She and her baby remain healthy by the lake when many in the town die of fever and this raises fear in the town. Hoffman is drawing on the perception found in both popular and academic imagery that “witchcraft accusations originated in local conflict and personal misfortune” (Hall 1985: 279). With the death of so many and Rebecca’s awkward position in the community it becomes natural that the townspeople would decide to test her witchery. Taking matters into their own hands, they decide to see if she will drown in the very lake she lived by. Thus the lake takes on particular meaning on the day Rebecca Sparrow is drowned as a witch in it by the women and men of Unity who are testing her. Nature reacts strongly to this attempt to control

Rebecca as she is dragged bleeding to the water: “It was January, far too early for the snowdrops to appear, yet everywhere Rebecca’s blood fell snowdrops grew. Everything else was burned away. Grass never grew there again, even thistle would not sprout here, not milkweed, not even thorn apple” (PF 247). As she is forced into the water the turtles move under the ice which groans, the lake makes a gulping sound and the sparrows chatter. When the lake claims her, leaving the villagers with an empty rope, their guilt and shame are set and the birds weave the hair shorn from Rebecca’s head into their nests as a reminder.

The founders of Unity sent Rebecca to live by Hourglass Lake in order to dispose of a disagreeable burden. The lake became a place of refuge but also pain as Rebecca was drowned there in another attempt to dispose of her. However, instead of repairing the situation, the townsfolk succeeded in creating a permanent reminder of their shame. Like the scent of roses in *The River King*, the scent of the lake water is a spectral presence (cf. Zamora 1995: 498–9) that is part of the identity of the Sparrow women and serves as a reminder of the past. This spectral presence is so strong in what was once Rebecca Sparrow’s home that the Cake House and the lake seem at times to inhabit the same space and the house is often described as being always damp and smelling of lake water. When Jenny is feeling topophobic about her home this odor and dampness further repel her, but she is unable to escape it. Jenny carries the scent of the water “dark and muddy and sweet” (PF 40) when she visits from Boston and even Stella, who has barely lived in the Cake House, smells of water lilies so it is not proximity to the lake but rather connection to the history of the Sparrow women that is given sensory reality through the odor and dampness.

For those who respect the Sparrows the spectral presence is experienced favorably. When Matt researched old documents to trace the invisible influence of the Sparrows on the town’s history he found that “Whenever the Sparrows were mentioned in one of the old record books, the scent of lake water arose off the paper, green and sweet and unbelievably potent” (PF 109). His attempts to find traces of the Sparrow women are assisted by the spectral presence enabling Matt to assist in the resurfacing of the Sparrow’s past.

Stella’s interaction with the lake takes on a new form through an experiment for her science class. Ever since the Hathaway patriarch drowned in the lake it has been an inhospitable place to all but the Sparrows. The snapping turtles, which clearly represent the Sparrows as a whole, keep others away and the lake has taken on a mythology of its own among the youth of the town with tales of the haunting of the horse Hathaway drowned with. It has become a place to display

bravery. The legendary nature of the bottomless lake highlights Hathaway's role and once again the Sparrows are made invisible although their influence is felt since Hathaway drowned in guilt over Rebecca's death. Stella becomes interested in water through her science class and decides it is necessary to get a sample from the middle of the lake as part of a science project. She and her classmate are attacked while collecting the sample, but the patterns of the past are reversed as Jenny Sparrow saves the life of Stella's friend who is descended from some of the very people responsible for killing Rebecca. Thus Hoffman is able to use this event to show several things: that the mythology of the lake is centered on the founding fathers rather than Rebecca's pain, that quantifying nature can not remove mystery, and that reconciliation is possible.

One of the most constant features of the landscape is the old oak; it is described as the oldest oak in the Commonwealth and has symbolic meaning for the community. There is a tradition in New England of viewing particular trees as monuments, 'living witnesses' to momentous events in the community (Stilgoe 1982: 27) that is reflected in New England literature. Buell (1986) writes:

Consider the motif of the great, ancient tree that functions as a community's spiritual center. Like all other obsessive motifs in village portraiture, this tree figure involves both a codification of social reality and the reincarnation of archetypal symbolism, in this case the symbol of the tree of life. (306-7)

Blackwell Look-No-Further discussed in section 4.5.2. The oak tree on the common in Unity is a timeless tree that seems to have stood there with its swarm of bees since Rebecca's day. For different members of the community it has different meanings—solace, mercy, forgiveness—and as its existence is threatened in the present of the narrative many of the characters visit it and speak of it. Throughout the present of the narrative Matt is slowly working on dismantling the tree because it is dying and has become a potential danger. Matt works very slowly and many of the characters sentimentally follow his work. As a symbol of the community, the tree's slow death is symbolic of the destructive nature of the relationship of Unity and the Sparrows for the community as a whole.

The tree is falling apart and some branches have been wired onto the trunk to protect it against storms but when Matt begins cutting it down he discovers that "half of the tree had unexpectedly begun to leaf out, weeks behind its season, but not entirely dead" (PF 272) and so he removes the dead portions from the tree while trying "his best to salvage the half that was still somewhat healthy" (ibid.).

His work with the tree parallels his work with his thesis. Just as he delves into history to write about the Sparrow women in indelible ink, he rewrites the landscape. He not only preserves the heritage of the community but also shapes it. Just as he cuts away the dead portions of the oak, leaving only the leafing parts, he also articulates the contributions of the Sparrow women to Unity in such a manner that he is able to bring together the Sparrows and the community. By introducing Rebecca as having appeared out of the wilderness Hoffman is able to create a narrative that *plays out* the tensions associated with it by the settlers (see section 1.2.1). When Rebecca proves ‘uncivilizable’ because of her unwillingness to conform to the narrative of the community she is marginalized physically through her positioning in the landscape as well as imaginatively in the cultural landscape of Unity. Hoffman uses this conflation of the wilderness—uncontrolled nature—and Rebecca to create a relationship between the Sparrows and the community of Unity that questions uses of power and control in the imaginative creation of place.

## 6.5 Memory in Unity

In *The Probable Future* the memorial landscape of Unity has hidden the Sparrows for generations out of shame and guilt while the descendants of those responsible for Rebecca’s death have striven to create a series of monuments and memorials that contain memories of communal sacrifice. Seymour (1999) writes that “Landscape representations are situated: the view comes from somewhere, and both the organisation of landscapes on the ground, and their representations, are and have been often tied to particular relationships of power between people” (194). Rebecca Sparrow never fit into the town of Unity and her differences challenged the character of the town. In naming their town Unity certain ideological conceptualizations of community were voiced. Rebecca’s arrival and unnatural behaviour served as a direct challenge to the character of the community and successively drastic steps were taken to curtail her. Ironically, although the townspeople came together to condemn Rebecca her execution did not enable them to return the community to a state of union as they became isolated in their guilt. It was not until the history written in invisible ink was valorized that Unity as a community could live up to its name.

In Unity there are two sets of memories that jostle against each other. As these memories publically resurface we can see what Leerssen calls a retroactive thrust: “New events will trigger re-calibrations and even re-inscriptions of

established memories; each fresh turn of events will lead to a re-inventory and re-assessment as to how it affects the usefulness and constitution of the available memory reserve” (2010: 243). The public and private memorializations of Rebecca Sparrow—Stella’s ‘sacrifice’ of her hair, the dissolution of the memento case, the monument on the common and the ringing of the bell—all serve to calibrate the collective cultural memory of the town.





## 7 “More apple trees than there are houses:” Hoffman’s Small New England Towns

In all six of the books studied Hoffman succeeds in creating a strong sense of place on different scales. The homes of the protagonists and their immediate environs are shown to be biographical, lived places for the characters. The larger communities within which these houses are set are also developed throughout the books. Cresswell (2004) writes:

Novels and films (at least successful ones) often evoke a sense of place—a feeling that we the reader/viewer know what it is like to ‘be there’. We often have a sense of place about where we live, or where we lived when we were children. This is what the author Lucy Lippard has called *The Lure of the Local*. (7-8)

Hoffman’s novels succeed in evoking such a sense of place in her fictive, small New England towns. In many ways these fictional towns “feel” like Harvard, my childhood biographical place. However, despite the similarities of towns such as Monroe, Unity, Haddan, Blackwell and even Truro the individual experiences of the characters, the complexities of familial and communal relationships and the particular features given to each town succeed in distinguishing them. Each of them comes to have its own distinct sense of place, a feeling of the local.

Inherent in the local is the concept of place—a portion of land/town/cityscape seen from the inside, the resonance of a specific location that is known and familiar. Most often place applies to our own “local”—entwined with personal memory, known or unknown histories, marks made in the land that provoke and evoke. Place is latitudinal and longitudinal within the map of a person’s life. It is temporal and spatial, personal and political. A layered location replete with human histories and memories, place has width as well as depth. It is about connections, what surrounds us, what formed it, what happened there, what will happen there. (Lippard 1979: 7)

Lippard’s description of the local contains many of the elements that have been enumerated in different chapters. Personal memory is central to the formation of identity and also becomes social within families and sub-communities. Known and unknown histories are explored and developed throughout novels and across linked short stories. The landscape is shaped and read by different characters in terms of attachment and negotiating levels of belongingness. The temporal and

spatial interplay of experience and the construction of narratives lead to the shaping of community and individuals' interaction with it. Hoffman explores each of the towns in terms of its many layers of history, memories and the mythology that is central to the connections that make up the community. Hoffman's fictive towns become imagined communities through her tapping into the lure of the local.

## **7.1 Tracings in the Landscape**

The small New England town is a cherished image that Alice Hoffman employs in many of her Massachusetts novels. It is an image of such national familiarity that its elements have come to take on symbolic meanings that contribute to the creation of a strong sense of place. The cultural landscape of the region provides her with a wealth of images related to the imaginative identity of New England with which to construct her small towns.

Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructions of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock. ... But it should also be acknowledged that once a certain idea of a landscape, a myth, a vision, establishes itself in an actual place, it has a peculiar way of muddling categories, of making metaphors more real than the referents; of becoming, in fact, part of the scenery. (Schama 1995: 61)

Hoffman is able to employ the metaphors of the landscape in creating her towns. These metaphors could be restrictive following a template of model and simply echo shared images of New England and its small towns as they draw on literary tradition and stereotypical representations of New Englanders (cf. Häggström 1996: 119) and yet in the details of the novels Hoffman's use of the metaphors are not simply clichéd. Through the novels Hoffman's towns acquire specificity. Entrikin (1991) explains that "places become specific as we give them meaning in relation to our actions as individuals and as members of groups" (16). Haddan, Monroe, Unity, Blackwell and Truro all become specific places through the ways in which the characters read and interact with the landscape over time. Their unique experiences of place make these places attain specificity (cf. Entrikin 1991: 18–20). In addition to the characters, Hoffman draws on elements of the landscape such as buildings, commons and memorials, the flora and fauna of the region and the northern climate in order to create unique, vivid communities with an authentic sense of place.

Central to this is the concept of landscape. In exploring landscape as both object and subject Cosgrove ([1984] 1998) writes of the meaning landscape is given through the relationships of people and their environment:

Below [a morphological level] lie deeper meanings which are culturally and historically specific and which do not necessarily have a direct empirical warranty. Formal morphology remains unconvincing as an account of *landscape* to the extent that it ignores such symbolic dimensions—the symbolic and cultural meaning invested in these forms by those who have produced and sustained them, and that communicated to those who come into contact with them. (18)

The symbolic meanings of landscape take on specificity through the local culture and an awareness of history as it is written into and reinforced by the landscape. The landscape is created, shaped and altered in accordance with the meanings the community invests in it and it can also be accessed by those who enter the community and become part of it.

Hoffman's small towns are dominated by the traditional landscape of the small New England town with a town hall presiding over the common or green. There are also a few small shops and cafes run and patronized by locals. An old library stands nearby and the common is adorned with statues that have been created to commemorate the Revolutionary and Civil Wars as well as local figures of importance. Although Hoffman does sometimes mention the iconic steepled churches found in New England towns, they are only mentioned in passing and do not figure heavily in the cultural landscape of the towns she creates, nor does religion. In *The River King* Pete Byers mentions church once, but even then it is only in terms of community and secrets. If anything, Hoffman is passively aggressive in relation to an absence of religion. This is perhaps a reflection of the secularization that has occurred over time. Even the common image of the Puritans is no longer dominated by religion but rather shaped by the traits of thrift and industry that have come to be associated with them.

Stilgoe (1998) has described the image of the American small town as follows:

The small town—essentially a group of stores and offices set around the main street armature, a second group of businesses, chiefly wholesale and light manufacturing and repairing, focused on a parallel street, and then the houses

lining a dozen or so residential streets merging into farmland—is quintessentially childhood space. (139)

In describing it as childhood space, Stilgoe refers to the emotional quality of the imaginative associations of the image. The image is based on a combination of the New England village and the later small towns of the Mid West and consists of elements that evoke a sense of a tight-knit local community. These same elements are delineated in Hoffman’s description of Haddan near the beginning of *The River King* which a neutral narrator describes as an initial glimpse into the hetero-image of the cultural landscape of the town:

... the town of Haddan hadn’t changed in the last fifty years. The village itself was three blocks long, and, for some residents, contained the whole world. Along with Selena’s Sandwich Shoppe which served breakfast all day, there was a pharmacy at whose soda fountain the best raspberry lime rickeys in the Commonwealth could be had, as well as a hardware store that offered everything from nails to velveteen ... There was St. Agatha’s with its granite facade, and the public library, with its stained-glass windows, the first to be built in the county. Town hall, which had burned down twice, had finally been rebuilt with mortar and stone, and was said to be indestructible ... All along Main Street, there were large white houses, set back from the road, whose wide lawns were ringed with black iron fences punctuated by little spikes on top ... Beyond Main Street the village became sparser, fanning out into new housing developments and then into farmland ... Beyond town, there were still acres of fields and a crisscross of dirt roads. (RK 11–3)

Hoffman describes the center of the typical small New England town while particularizing it with proper names such as Selena’s and St. Agatha’s and passing mentions of specific superlatives “the best” and “the first” in the Commonwealth and county—while drawing on metaphorical aspects of the familiar landscape she also introduces unique elements to make it specific. As the description draws out from the center of town change is shown in the new developments and finally the sense of countryside is evoked in the mention of farms and dirt roads.

A sense of the local environment is also developed and maintained by the pervasive elements of the natural environment that are repeated throughout the towns. The lakes and rivers of the area are given historical significance and often play an active role in the development of the narrative. The natural landscape is built up with the use of trees, flowers, birds and animals associated with the

region. Some of these are specifically linked to certain novels—roses and trout in *The River King*; sweet peas, turnips and blackbirds in *Blackbird House*; bears and eels in *The Red Garden*; lilies in *Blue Diary*; ivy and lilacs in *Practical Magic*; peach trees, snowdrops and sparrows in *The Probable Future*—while others are more pervasive markers of nature in Massachusetts; the prime example of this being the apple trees. The influence of the climate is apparent not only in the effects the changing seasons have on the plants, but also in their effects on the residents of the towns, both animal and human.

Despite these similarities, Hoffman does succeed in creating towns that have their own individual senses of place. This is partially done through the histories of the towns. The past is visible in Monroe through the apple trees, library and even the name of the town itself. In Haddan, the major division between locals and the boarding school community is developed through an interweaving of the present and the past—a past kept alive not only through tales but also written into the physical and cultural landscape. This past and the divergent readings of it can be seen, for example, in the contrasting images associated with Chalk House and the statue of Dr. Howe. The past is even more forcefully present in Unity where the events of thirteen generations back still figure heavily in the relationships of the Sparrow women with the rest of the community. Again the landscape is inscribed with images that serve as constant reminders of local history in not only physical structures such as the Cake House but also through nature in terms of where the snowdrops grow and even in the names of places such as Dead Horse Lane.

An interesting feature common to the towns is the way in which Hoffman draws attention to how certain families can be traced in the landscape. Growing up in Harvard I slowly became aware of this. The first way in which I observed this was in the way prominent founding families of the town were visible in street names. There tended to be confusion about whether we lived on Fairbank St. or Fairbanks St. and my spelling of my home address wavered until it was explained to me that our street was named after the Fairbank family. Another clear example was in the naming of an institution: the local High School, the Bromfield School, is named after Margaret Bromfield Blanchard who was a prominent member of the community who founded a private school in the 1870s which eventually became a public school. Some buildings such as the Hildreth House were privately owned for generations but then purchased by the town for public use when the descendants were no longer able to maintain them while others such as the Hazel House continues as a private estate that sometimes hosts public events. In *The Probable Future* the Sparrow women's history is written in "invisible ink"

as the character Matt describes it, but other families such as the Hathaways and the Elliots are written into the landscape of Unity in a clearly visible manner with commemorative statues modeled after them and the names of their sons inscribed on them. Likewise, in *Blue Diary* an awareness of the Monroe family is present in the town even though none of the family remains. Jorie's friend lives in a house built by the Monroes.

When she looks out the window of her house high on Hilltop, she can see the whole town before her, a grid of deep blue shadows and sparkling light, as though diamonds have been thrown down in the hillocks beyond the trees ... It's a big house she lives in, built at the turn of the century as a wedding present for Ella Monroe, whose father founded the town and left a ring of apple trees a mile wide around the old abandoned house where he once lived, smack at the end of King George's Road, a location that was wild frontier at the time, when it wasn't unusual for bears to eat their fill from the orchards and bobcats to claw at the bark of the saplings. (BD 38)

Ella Monroe's house had been built in a place that allowed her to have a view of the landscape of the town. The lights of the town at night illuminate the dispersal of the community even as they come together to form a patterned space. Built as a wedding present, the founder of Monroe symbolically gifted the town to his daughter as well. The history of the entire town is connected to the frontiersman founding legend through the traces left by the apple trees and the abandoned house, while the taming of nature is represented through the actions of the fabled bears and bobcats. Although no Monroes remain in the town, their legend has.

These examples of certain families writing themselves into the cultural and physical landscape of the town clearly relate to their positions within the community. Hoffman demonstrates the hegemonic use of landscape to dictate the images at the heart of the formation of the identity of the towns. Thus the auto-images formed by those in power are tangibly represented in the iconography of the landscape which then reinforces their identity and position. At the same time these families aid in the creation of specificity. "Local uniqueness matters. ... Spatial differentiation, geographical variety ... is integral to the reproduction of society and its dominant social relations" (Massey 1984: 299–300). Massey, as a contextualist, is particularly concerned with economic matters whereas Hoffman is clearly not. However, it is clear by implication within the novels that families such as the Hathaways and Monroes have been economically dominant. Entrikin (1991) writes that "Specificity has been described by the contextualists both in

terms of uniqueness and in terms of the fusion of place and experience in practical knowledge” (21). The iconography of the landscape is read by those with practical knowledge of the community. This mingling of identity, position and representation becomes ironic in *The Red Garden* where Hallie Brady’s son-in-law Harry Partridge, as mayor of Blackwell, instituted the celebration of Founder’s Day despite his personal memories of Hallie’s desire for privacy. The symbolism of her ingenuity and resourcefulness is inscribed on the cultural landscape even as a detailed, personal memory of her is lost. Harry’s respect for Hallie and his own position within the community over-ride Hallie’s reticence and so he shapes the landscape to retain what it is that he values. Although iconographic elements of the landscape tend to be made as representatives of the auto-images of those in power, the example of Dr. Howe’s statue presented in Chapter 3 shows that the readings of these symbolic representations do not always end up taking the preferred interpretation. The past is symbolically brought into the present via the iconography of the built landscape but it is reshaped in the present to fit current needs and understandings of the community and can be renegotiated.

*The Probable Future* provides a particularly interesting example in terms of how changing positions of power and shifting readings of images can lead to transformation in the landscape as different aspects of the past are remembered. As reconciliation is achieved the progenitor of the Sparrow women—whose history had been inscribed in indelible but invisible ink for so long—is commemorated in a new monument that her descendants commission to be placed on the common of Unity. As the hetero-image of the Sparrows changes, not only their own identity but the cultural identity of the town is altered allowing Unity to finally live up to its name. Thus it is illustrated that landscape “is not just the site where we recognize our historical, cultural, and perceptual investment in space, but also where we redefine it ... an active site of identity formation” (Dubow 2009: 128). The identity of the community and the individuals in it are actively reshaped by this act of memorialization.

In contrast to the Sparrows who are finally recognized in the built landscape of the common, in *Blue Diary* a redefinition of identity is achieved through destruction. Initially, the description of the town library and its grounds includes mention of an apple tree similar in name to the Blackwell Look-No-Further (see section 4.5.2):

... the oldest apple tree in the village, a rare Westfield Seek-No-Further, which always blooms months after all the other trees in town and has grown on [the] spot since 1790, planted a hundred years before the cornerstones of the library were set down. (BD 105)

Originally, this tree has special meaning to Jorie and Ethan's son, Collie, because of time shared under it with his father, but like Jorie Collie feels betrayed by Ethan. He cuts the tree down in a successful attempt to sever his ties to Monroe and change his identity:

He goes past the library and stands looking at the place where the old Westfield Seek-No-Further used to grow. ... Collie feels as though he were seeing everything for the first time, as though he were a stranger in town. Where is he? He doesn't know. Where's he going? He's not certain of that either. (BD 272)

In altering a lived place he is able to disconnect it from his self-narrative. He has symbolically altered the landscape and in the process released his ties to the town his family has lived in for generations.

## **7.2 Writings in the Landscape: Blood and Ink**

In many of Hoffman's towns the physical and cultural landscape have been written on in blood and ink. Hoffman uses imagery related to both blood and its redness and physical and metaphorical ink in order to explore both personal and communal memories in connection to specific characters. Some of these memories are latent or archived while others remain individual and private.

Hoffman connects the idea of red blood with heritage and death in her books. In *The Probable Future*, Jenny Sparrow thinks of her heritage as "chains of blood and memory" (PF 7) when she is trying to escape from the pain and isolation of the Sparrow women. Blood and death are linked in the novels: through Rebecca Sparrow's bloody trail leading to the lake where she was drowned, through Sally's inability to see the color red after her husband's death in *Practical Magic* and through the discussion of the memory of the blood of the girl Ethan killed in *Blue Diary* which remains on the wall. The brother of the dead girl says to Sally "Maybe you can't see it anymore, but I know it's there. ... You never get rid of it" (BD 204). In all of these instances, individual memory or familial social memory becomes dominated by blood and death, and in Rebecca's case her blood comes



to alter the physical landscape so that the trail she was led down to the lake by has grown nothing but snowdrops where her blood fell ever since.

Through the interaction of private and public meanings of blood for different characters and communities blood also becomes associated with the idea of the private being laid bare. Annie Howe's blood takes on private meaning in *The River King* when she uses it to color a white rose red in the hopes that it will fulfill her husband's requirement of release. Her death is the result of his scorn. The private memories of those few who witnessed Dr. Howe's laughter is paralleled by the social memory of the Magician's Club of Chalk House and their commemoration of it in their pledge. For Helen the event is remembered not only in terms of Annie's death but also in terms of how it opened up her understanding of Annie; Annie's blood had allowed Helen into Annie's sense of herself. This same revealing of self arises in *Blackbird House* when the daughter of the man who planted the red pear tree describes the severity of the family's mourning at her father's death: "We had been pulled inside out by my father's death, our sorrow and blood there for anyone to see, in our hair, our boots, our clothes, our pies, our very names" (BH 40). Blood and redness are used to lay the self visibly bare to the community. "There was no difference between her inside and her outside, no barrier, no bone, only blood" (BH 48). The girl's physical description of her mother conveys the same message as the red garden that Emily Dickinson plants in *The Red Garden*. Emily told "the inside story of who she was" (RG 66) as she altered the garden and years later Louise felt the same. The Red Garden itself is a landscape that contains memories of heritage, death and identity within it.

Ink also appears in several of the novels as a preserver of memory. In some instances, the ink of the private writing of an individual reveals self while in other cases the ink of public records serves as an entryway into memory. Metaphorical ink is also used to imaginatively write into the landscape. The private diary of *Blue Diary* and the letter Jenny writes to Gillian that Gary reads in *Practical Magic* are both examples of writing that was never intended to be shared. Both serve to enable a character to come to a strong understanding of someone through their written words. In *Blackbird House* the archives enable Katherine and Emma to learn Isaac's name and add detail to the lore that had arisen around him and when similar records about Amy Starr are accessed in *The Red Garden* the comment added in fresh looking blue ink leads to the Apparition. Thus cultural memories are added to through recourse to latent archival memories. Cultural memories are also encoded in figurative ink. In *The Probable Future* the

“invisible ink” the Sparrow’s history is written in becomes valorized through Matt’s thesis and changes in the landscape in terms of communal forms of memorialization. Like the invisible ink of the Sparrows, the white blackbird, ghost of Isaac’s tellingly named bird Ink, becomes a reversed image of memory that resurfaces over time.

### **7.3 The New Englander**

Not only does Hoffman draw on New England images to reinforce the senses of place she creates for the towns in terms of the physical landscape but she also makes use of the idea that the environment influences the character of the people associated with it. She is not practicing environmental determinism, but drawing on common perception. As Davey (1998) writes “Strong regionalisms develop narratives and figures that imply the geographic inevitability of the cultural manifestations that partly constitute the region” (4). These narratives normalize certain perceptions of how the people of the region think and behave. Thus, understandings of the imagined regions of the United States attribute certain features to the people from them. In writing of New England Ayers & Onuf (1996) explore these constructed perceptions: “Regional differences in people appear to be reflections of regional differences in land and climate ... cold, rocky New England creating cold, rocky New Englanders” (2). The image of the typical New Englanders of the past is one of hard work, thrift and virtue. Hoffman makes use of this image in portraying the villagers of Haddan in contrast to the elite that came to the Haddan School when it was first founded:

At that time, the rich fields circling the town of Haddan were owned by prosperous farmers who cultivated asparagus and onions and a peculiar type of yellow cabbage known for its large and delicate fragrance. These farmers put aside their plows and watched as boys arrived from every corner of the Commonwealth and beyond to take up residence at the school, but even the wealthiest among them were unable to afford tuition for their own sons. Local boys had to make do with the dusty stacks at the library on Main Street and whatever fundamentals they might learn in their own parlors and fields. To this day, people in Haddan retain a rustic knowledge of which they are proud. Even the children can foretell the weather; they can point to and name every constellation in the sky. (RK 2–3)

Hoffman employs the cultural images of the New Englander as she describes their “rustic knowledge” in contrast to the images of the elite students at Haddan School. Their knowledge is related to the natural world and even the constellations serve as a reminder of their place and where they belong. Hall (1995) writes that

... we think of cultures as strongly placed, not because all cultures *are* but *because that is how we imagine them*. ... when we think of or imagine cultural identity, we tend to ‘see’ it in a place, in a setting, as part of an imaginary landscape or ‘scene’. We *give* it a background, we put it in a frame in order to make sense of it. (181)

The identity the boys of Haddan create for themselves is situated within a framework that includes a strong spatial orientation. They create an imaginative ‘place’ for themselves that enables them to make sense of the social organization of the town and school. Hoffman also draws on the harsh climate to symbolize the hardiness of the New Englander when she describes the relationship between the boys of Haddan and the boys of the school (see section 3.1). The tenacity of the local boys is highlighted as they struggle through harsh conditions to get to school. It is shown in sharp contrast to the pampered existence of the boys at Haddan School. Thus boundaries are maintained and identity reinforced. The auto-image of the local boys is a mixed one of pride and yet a sense of unworthiness because of the hetero-image of the boys at Haddan School. The power structure is carefully maintained and despite their strong identification with the cultural landscape of the town, the local boys are continually reminded of their place within the community.

#### **7.4 Boundaries and Changes**

In writing about regional identity, Conforti states that it “is not simply an organic outcome of human interaction with the physical environment—the geology and climate for example—of a particular place. Regions are real places but also historical artifacts whose cultural boundaries shift over time” (Conforti 2001: 1–2). The same is true at a local scale. The cultural landscape of a place is heavily influenced by the images associated with it. This can be seen in Monroe as the old Monroe house which, together with the family who built it, was once a dominant element of the landscape. As the cultural landscape of the town grew and changed it was first replaced by a newer house in a more central location and eventually

abandoned completely. The Monroe family founded the town and played a central role in its history, but as cultural boundaries shifted their image was restricted to the sense of heritage in the town.

That there are “emotional dynamics involved in the intersection of identity with senses of place” (Rose 1995: 103) is undeniable. Boundaries are important “in trying to understand how identity is involved in the often intense emotional construction of senses of place” (ibid. 103). Boundaries work in two ways. They establish the insiders, who identify with them and feel a sense of belonging or attachment that is so common to sense of place, but boundaries also establish outsiders (ibid. 99). Returning to the central village of New England towns as an imagined community, it becomes clear that the image is constructed to serve certain purposes. As the explication of the New England village in Chapter 1 shows, “The idealization of the New England village began in part as a cultural strategy by which members of the old local elite could maintain their social authority” (Nissenbaum 1996: 47). Thus, the social authority of the Hathaways and Elliots of Unity, for example, is used to draw boundaries that exclude the Sparrows (cf. Paasi 2009). The Sparrow women are silenced because their history does not fit within the auto-image of the town and so even though they are helpful, productive members of the community, the boundaries of the community serve to isolate them. These boundaries are created by the hegemony which manipulates the auto-images and hetero-images of place in order to determine who belongs, who has the right to influence the cultural landscape and sense of place.

Hall (1995) writes that “[t]here is a strong tendency to ‘landscape’ cultural identities, to give them an imagined place or ‘home,’ whose characteristics echo or mirror the characteristics of the identity in question” (182). These imaginative places not only reflect the influence of the physical environment on identity formation but are also delineated by boundaries which are often reliant on how the past is interpreted or used as heritage. The heritage of a place then is not only integral to ‘sense of place’ but also serves as a trigger to insider and outsider identity. Anderson’s ([1983] 1991) conceptualization of imagined communities includes the idea that our understanding of communities is made up of the images, meanings and ideas of the community that are created and carried by its members. Hoffman’s fictive towns make use of the imagery associated with the small New England town effectively.

## 7.5 History in the Landscape

The regional identity of New England is one heavily dependent on its imaginative role in the history of the nation. As Chapter 1 details, “the New England orthodoxy succeeded, precisely through their commitment to the Puritan ideal, in transmitting a myth that has remained central to the culture” (Bercovitch 1979: 91) of both the region and the nation. Ayers and Onuf (1996) write about the past and history in relation to the conceptualization of regions:

Thinking ourselves across space, we think ourselves backward in time, imaginatively returning to particular places in an idealized past. American geography thus recapitulates American history; history is imminent in the distinctive character and culture of the nation’s diverse regions. This dialectic of space and time, mobility and nostalgia, has shaped our understanding of the role of regions in American history. (1)

The nostalgic nature of the imagery associated with small New England towns is particularly prominent. That the white villages and the heritage associated with them are an imaginative construct of the nineteenth century does not detract from their prominence in the cultural landscape of the region. The historical role of the region as an early area of settlement and a model of a republican ideal figure heavily in the mythology of the small New England towns.

Americans use history to actively animate the landscape, often elaborating Romantic narratives that make particular communities seem more significant or unique than they actually are. These mythologies of place provide limited access to the rewards of geographic rootedness, like a facade of neighborhood, belonging, and of personal significance drawn from connection to important historical events. (Holt 2010: 280–1)

The image of the village draws on a collective past that was shaped to meet the needs of the communities of the New England region. The images are not static as their symbolism is gradually reinterpreted and reformed in the cultural landscapes of New England. This dynamic quality of the images can be seen in that although the churchly edifices the Puritan meetinghouses were transformed into (see section 3) still dominate the iconic image of the small New England town they no longer do so as physical representations of religion but rather community in the cultural landscape. Lowenthal (1975) comments on the way in which history and symbols interact when he writes “in America the church spire in the village, the

pumpkin on the porch, the cracked Liberty Bell. Symbols are doubly historical: they serve to remind us of the past, and they require time and a past to become symbols” (12). These symbols are absorbed into more specific, local images to create authentic places in which to enjoy feelings of attachment and rootedness.

*The Red Garden* with its interlocking short-stories can be seen as a study of how the landscape is animated by history in a small town. The stories follow the lives of the descendants of the founders of the town and woven through them is a growing awareness of how the accretion of private and public memories contributes to a growing, changing sense of place. History is not only present in the layers of the physical landscape but also in the mythologies that have developed to shape a specific identity for the town of Blackwell. *The Probable Future* provides a counter narrative in that the experiences of the Sparrows who have been marginalized by the hegemonic forces of the town are the focal point. The cultural landscape is rewritten as the wrongs of the past are addressed. Robertson & Richards (2003) write of the role of landscape in relation to change: “As an instrument of cultural power, landscape is both embedded in, and a product of dynamic processes of interaction” (10). The commemorative changes that occur in the landscape of Unity are possible because of the dynamic nature of the processes of interaction which allows for resurfacings within the community that lead to an altered understanding of the historical role of the Sparrows within the community.

Alice Hoffman uses the imagined communities of New England, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the small New England town in order to create a strong sense of place in her fictional towns and explore the complexities of identity and belonging. Monroe, Unity, Haddan, Blackwell and Truro are all particularized giving them a sense of the local while also connecting them to a larger imagined community. Hoffman creates vivid cultural landscapes for the towns by employing the images of the region in conjunction with individualized histories that are written into the physical landscape of each town.

## 8 Conclusion

This explication of Alice Hoffman's creation of fictional small New England towns employs the tools of cultural imagology as a framework. Through the application of the concepts of social memories and belongingness, hetero and auto images of groups of different sizes from the familial to the regional, as well as collective memory and the use of resurfacing to create mythologies, Hoffman's texts have been used to explore how space becomes place and imagined communities are shaped and maintained.

Throughout this study, place is viewed as space that is given particular meaning through both private and public experience. It is socially constructed and maintained through the interplay of auto and hetero images. This can be seen in the imaginative formation of New England as a region with the shifting emphasis of its errand and Puritan past over time in relation to the needs of society. As Pred (1984) writes "Place ... always involves an appropriation and transformation of society in time and space" (279). When viewed as the interaction between space and society, the creation of place becomes a negotiation of meaning. Places "are all spaces which people have made meaningful. They are all spaces people are attached to in one way or another" (Cresswell 2004: 7). The meanings given to place—both personal and public—contribute to the elusive 'sense of place' and its associated images. Kay (1991) argues that "Women's sense of place seems more rooted to the concept of home and relatedness, less to the staple export or political region" (449). In her novels Hoffman is not concerned with the economic structures of society but rather with the ways in which community is shaped and maintained through relationships. Her narratives illustrate that the meaning of place or even region is not completely dominated by institutionalised interaction but rather the negotiation of images and current communal needs with an understanding of the past. In writing about humanist geographers Buttimer (1978) highlights the significance of community in the conceptualisation of place:

If one were to ask what the meaning and potential significance of *place* would be for us, or for places similar to ours, we need to redefine what we mean by "community" and "place". One has to see both in dynamic terms, as horizons for basic life processes, rather than as artefacts or nouns. (37)

Buttimer emphasises the dynamic nature of community and place while highlighting the physical and imaginative use of place.

This use of place and community can be seen in Hoffman's frequent use of the designation commonwealth in her novels. Massachusetts is one of four commonwealths in the United States of America. The use of 'commonwealth' by people from Massachusetts is often due to pride in the imaginative history and perceived role in establishing the republican ideals that came to shape the policies created as the colonies fought for independence and became a nation. Perhaps Hoffman also uses the word commonwealth so frequently because of its associations with ideas of community. Just as the state is an integral part of the region, so too are the towns part of the state and the private homes part of the small towns; the potential for cultural imagological studies of communities on a range of scales is exciting.

A cultural imagological reading of Hoffman's Massachusetts novels breaks the normal bounds that place her writing in the sphere of 'cuteness' (Kakutani 1995). Her novels are written for a popular audience and sell widely but have received almost no critical attention. When they are reviewed it is often in terms of their evocative depictions of nostalgic, small towns and they are enjoyed for the pleasure they bring rather than for artistic value. In *Fields of Vision*, Daniels (1993) explores how Constable's artwork has been read and understood in different ways at different times in order to meet different needs of the nation. In 1902 Sir Charles J. Holmes published an important study of Constable's work which offered a decidedly negative critique of his landscape paintings from a highly academic perspective. Daniels (1993) writes:

Holmes's connoisseurship carried great authority but it was sometimes resented by Constable's populist admirers. If Constable's pictures fell apart under Holmes's scrutiny, they knew what held them together, their resemblance to the places they depicted and places like them, places which beckoned those in search of rural England. Constable's popular admirers were interested not so much in painting as in scenery. (212)

Although Constable's place in the art world has since become well established, the popular response is reminiscent of responses to Hoffman's works. She might not be producing works of great literary merit, but most people read her books because they enjoy her stories and the interplay of relationships in them and as such they are cultural artifacts that are accessed by a wide range of people. Hoffman's focus on relationships, community and belonging could be seen as a modern jeremiad for a country in which there is concern about the weakening of communal bonds (cf. Putnam 2000). Working with her common themes of love,



fear, loss, death and forgiveness Hoffman's narratives lead to positive resolutions that strengthen individual characters as well as the bond of community.

Central to the six works examined here is the imaginative landscape of the small New England town, and this reading of these books focuses on the images written into the cultural landscape. Through particular details and images Hoffman's imagined towns acquire specificity even as they make use of common images associated with the region and together they create Hoffman Country, an effect similar to that described by Daniels (1993): "A visit to Constable Country could both bring his pictures into tight, local focus and disperse them into a more typical image of the nation at large" (213). This cultural imagological study of Hoffman's small New England towns explores both levels of images. Hoffman in some ways is very much writing about the small New England village but at the same time she explores the idea of community on a more (universal) level. Through a detailed explication of her small New England towns she becomes both the creator of and touchstone for images of New England prevalent in the iconosphere: a contingency which also makes her part of the heritage of New England.

In producing this study a continual difficulty encountered was finding ways in which to express the subjective experience contained within Hoffman's novels while also maintaining the recognition that the people and places being studied are fictional. The study is consciously focused on the stories of the texts rather than on the mechanics of writing or the political implications of the worldview presented in them. I initially set out to use theory about the real world as a means that would allow me to examine what it is about these novels that make them feel real, true to my own experiences of living in a small New England town. This has led to the need to integrate theory with the mimetic aspects of Hoffman's texts and I have tried to do so from the understanding that even if Hoffman has not systematically studied sociological and historical ideas of collective memory and narrative identity or cultural geographers' studies of place and landscape she has access to the iconosphere and her writing reflects her, perhaps instinctive, perhaps carefully honed understanding of individuals and community. In the six books studied here as well as her other adult novels, both those set in New England and those set elsewhere, Hoffman is not explicitly political. She is not concerned with challenging or attacking many of the postcolonial and postmodern concerns of weightier writers but her texts do deal with themes common to the everyday experiences of many.

There are several interesting directions of further study suggested within this one. An examination of Hoffman in comparison to Hawthorne in light of their “Yankee magic realism,” generational guilt and the intertextual links found in Hoffman’s work could be exciting. Likewise, studying Hoffman’s New England based texts in conjunction with the New England writings of Stowe or Jewett could be illuminating. Regionalist aspects of Hoffman’s writing could be fruitfully compared to the regional writing of contemporary regionalist writers. My personal experiences of Harvard have been valorized by my studies of cultural imagology and a study of the local—be it Harvard or elsewhere—employing the tools of cultural imagology could be interesting. The resurfacing of Mary Rowlandson’s narrative in Hilary Holliday’s book of poetry entitled “The Dreams of Mary Rowlandson” (2006) might be highly illuminating in terms of changing iconospheres.

The conceptual tools—spatial, temporal and imaginative—used to explore Hoffman’s books could also be fruitful if applied to other histories, places and mediums of material presentation. A variety of possibilities come to mind: a study of the topobiographical aspects of Tove Jansson’s *Summer Book*; an exploration of how the values, ideologies, social status and power, etc. of a historical figure or period piece of literature are made comprehensible to a contemporary audience in a cinematographic production—such as the way values are viewed by different characters in light of the wartime situation presented in *Foyle’s War*; the complexities of the process of re-naming streets with the merging of municipalities in Finland; the ways in which the material given to academic group leaders reinforces hegemonic interpretations of Stonehenge and other heritage sites; the ways in which the influence of anime in children’s cartoons are reshaping children’s concepts of beauty in the Western world; the complexities of the multicentered images used in Gap Seasonal commercials. Such interdisciplinary studies could help to uncover the ways in which images are produced and shared to create individual and communal understandings of the world.

Rapid developments in technology are eroding the authority of the printed word and multi-modal, multi-sensory ways of knowing are becoming dominant in the creation of elite as well as mass images. The possibilities of technological representation W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) describes in his work *Iconology* have already made it so that younger generations are being raised through interaction with an ever broadening array of images. New iconospheres are exploding exponentially and cultural imagology offers a framework to allow a disciplined, critical approach to a study of this. As a teacher, I have come to realise through

my research that today's youth are already mini-imagologists. For them, the written word is simply one among several forms of visual imagery and is not in a position of primacy. They are able to experience the imagery of all the senses virtually and to mine them for their pedagogic and communicative potential. They also turn readily to them to create multi-modal frameworks for processing experience and information. Cultural imagology provides a theoretical framework to analyse how it is that we make sense of the world around us in all its physical and virtual permutations.



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## Appendix

Brief summaries of the novels may serve to make the examination of them more accessible. In the case of the short story collections descriptions should suffice to serve the same function.

### *Practical Magic*

The Owens family is a family of witches. They live in an old house in an unspecified town in Massachusetts that was built by the first of the Owens women, Maria Owens. Sally and Gillian come to live with the old aunts on Magnolia Street when they are orphaned. Their childhood is made particularly difficult not only by the unusual way in which the aunts raise them, but also by the way the other children in the village react to them. They are aware of the business that the aunts conduct at twilight and have hidden to watch how the women of the village come to beg for love potions and charms. Sally, in her skepticism, tries to prove that their magic does not work, and as they see the devastating possibilities of passion and obsession both of the girls come to dread love. By the time first Gillian and then Sally leave Magnolia Street they have vowed to leave love and their heritage behind them.

Over the next eighteen years Gillian runs wild and moves from place to place falling in and out of love over and over again. Just about the only thing she remains true to is her vow to never come east of the Mississippi again. Sally finds happiness in Magnolia Street and gives birth to two daughters, Antonia and Kylie. She find a semblance of normalcy through her husband, and even comes to be accepted by the villagers, but then her husband is killed in an accident. After she struggles through depression, Sally packs herself and the girls into the car and leaves Massachusetts. She settles in a New York suburb and tries to create a completely mundane life for herself and the girls. This drab, peaceful existence is shattered one night the summer of Kylie's thirteenth birthday when Gillian drives up to Sally's house with the body of her dead, abusive lover, Jimmy, in the car.

Sally and Gillian bury the body in the backyard under the lilacs because Gillian is convinced she killed him. Then they become so preoccupied with their own lives that they fail to realize his ghost is haunting them until Kylie calls their attention to it. Sally cuts down the lilacs in an attempt to control the ghost but fails to realize that his malignant spirit continues to haunt them. Meanwhile, Kylie

is struggling with becoming a young woman, Antonia is forced to grow up and Gillian fights falling in love with a good man.

Everything comes to a head when an investigator named Gary Hallet from Arizona arrives looking for Jimmy. Sally is unable to lie to him and he returns to Arizona leaving the Owensens unaware of his intentions. As Jimmy's body begins to resurface through the lawn, the sisters finally decide it is time to call the aunts. The aunts arrive with all that is necessary to quiet the ghost and all six Owens women work together to restore equilibrium to their lives.

### *The River King*

The town of Haddon Massachusetts and the elite boarding school situated on the banks of the Haddon River have maintained a difficult relationship since the Haddon School was first started. The villagers and the students interact as little as possible, but their lives begin to twist together in new ways when some local boys find the body of one of the students drowned in the river.

Betsy Chase has come to Haddon to work at the school as the new photography teacher. She is engaged to the history teacher in charge of the boy's dormitory in the Chalk House, but she is unsure of herself and her relationship. Carlin Leander comes to the school from Florida on a swimming scholarship. She does not fit in with the other students. Although she dates the desirable Harry McKenna, she also befriends a mixed group of people including Miss Davis, the old history teacher who is wasting away, Gus Pierce, who has been expelled from a series of schools and fails to make a place for himself at the Haddon School either and Sean Byers who has come to help his uncle Pete at the local pharmacy.

When Gus is found dead, Abel Grey and his partner Joey come to investigate and all the friction between the town and the school flares up. The police department is soon appeased by the school but Abel, a third generation Haddon police officer, is not willing to let things rest and so he continues to investigate Gus' supposed suicide. Carlin does not believe Gus killed himself as she keeps being given little minnows by his ghost, Betsy's photographs also reveal that Gus is not ready to let go and Abe finds evidence that hints at murder. Abe continues his investigations, the past of the school is brought to light and the mysterious fraternity, the Magicians' Club, of Chalk House is unable to completely hide their actions.

As Abe discovers more about his family, Haddon and the school, his identity is challenged and his understanding of the world around him changes. Eventually,

he discovers who has murdered Gus, falls in love with Betsy and succeeds in ruining the lives of the boys guilty of murder even though he is unable to bring them to trial. In disgust at all that has been done and hidden, he and Betsy leave Haddon. Carlin, however, finds a place and meaning for herself and decides to stay.

### *Blue Diary*

*Blue Diary* is a retelling of the tale of Bluebeard. Ethan and Jorie Ford lead a perfect life in the town of Monroe Massachusetts where Jorie grew up. Ethan works as a carpenter, is a local hero through his work as a volunteer in the fire department and coaches his son's softball team. Jorie Ford is a local girl who grew up to be beautiful and friendly. She keeps a wonderful garden and is also heavily involved in the community of the town. They have a son, Collie, who is a sweet, congenial twelve-year-old. The family is respected and quietly envied, but everything begins to change with a phone call made by Collie's friend and neighbor, Kat Williams.

Late one night, Kat sees a picture of Ethan while watching an unsolved crime show and calls the number advertised. Ethan is arrested and the entire town begins to mobilize. Ethan's partner, Mark Derry, begins a drive to support and defend Ethan, Barney Stark agrees to look into the legal aspects of the case and soon the whole town is involved in rallies and fund raising. Jorie, however, is torn because Ethan confesses to her. He explains that he is no longer the young man who once raped and killed a beautiful young girl in Maryland, but as Jorie probes deeper, even visiting Maryland in order to get a sense of the enormity of what he has done, she comes to realize that she never really knew her husband and their married life has been based on lies. She comes to realize that for her at least present actions do not atone for the horrors of the past. Ethan may claim to be a different man, but he has kept the key to the young woman's diary hanging above his workbench all these years.

The Williams family has been shattered by the suicide of the father the preceding year. When his cancer became too much, he hanged himself, leaving his wife to her grief, his older daughter Rosarie struggling in her selfishness and Kat bewildered and in pain. Kat's grandmother tries to help, and while the healing process is slow and long, the family does begin to find each other again. Likewise, Jorie's best friend, Charlotte Kite, is also facing her own struggles with

her divorce going through and the beginning of chemotherapy, but she finds the strength to support Jorie as she fights her cancer.

Jorie also turns to her mother and sister, Anne, when she finds the Ford home unbearable. Collie is confused and disturbed and tries to shut everyone out, but Kat tenaciously follows him and tries to support him. Eventually, Ethan's extradition comes and he is moved to Maryland. The majority of the community still rallies behind him, but Jorie and Collin find themselves unable to do so. They also find it too difficult to remain in Monroe and depart in search of a new life.

### *The Probable Future*

*The Probable Future* is the story of the Sparrow women. Jenny Sparrow is the twelfth in a line of Sparrow women to live in the Cake House in the town of Unity, Massachusetts. Her mother, Elinor Sparrow, shut everyone out when her husband died in an accident, and Jenny was left feeling abandoned. Like the women before her, she woke up on her thirteenth birthday with a 'gift' that is part of her heritage. Each of the Sparrow women has had a unique gift and Jenny's is to dream other people's dreams. Unfortunately, she misidentified the dreamer whose dream attracted her the eve of her birthday and so begins a series of mistakes that end up in her marrying and later divorcing Will Avery the handsome, alluring, pathological liar of the town. She moves to Boston with him and tries to escape the past that has always shaped and marginalized the lives of the Sparrow women in Unity.

When Jenny's daughter, Stella Sparrow Avery, wakes up on the morning of her thirteenth birthday her mother is watching over her like a hawk. Jenny has spent her entire life keeping Stella away from her Sparrow heritage and Stella, far from feeling neglected, feels overprotected by her mother. She enjoys the company of her father and it is over dinner with him that she first tells what her 'gift' is—the ability to see the cause of someone's death. She is horrified to see that one of the young women in the restaurant they are at is going to be murdered soon and tells her father that he must do something. He tries to live up to someone's expectations for once and so he goes to the police. Once the young woman is indeed murdered, he becomes their prime suspect.

It is only because of the danger posed by the real murderer that Jenny takes Stella to Unity to live in the Cake House. Her only condition for Elinor is that Stella not be told about their heritage. Stella meets Hap Stewart, the grandson of the old doctor who quietly loves Elinor, and enters the local school only to

discover that in Unity, being a Sparrow is much more significant than being the daughter of a murder suspect and so she endeavors to learn about the past. Elinor, who is dying of cancer, shares some of the Sparrow heritage with her, but it is not until she steals and reads her uncle, Matt Avery's, thesis that she learns of how Rebecca Sparrow, the progenitor of the family, was killed by the good village people as a witch.

Meanwhile, Will Avery has inadvertently directed the murderer to Unity, Jenny has moved in with her mother and come to realize that it was Matt Avery who she should have loved and presently begins to love, Stella has moved in with Lizza Hull at the tea shop in Unity where Jenny has begun to work and Lizza Hull and Will Avery have fallen in love. Throughout all of this, old pains are revisited, forgiveness sought and granted and the schism between the Sparrow's and the rest of Unity healed.

### *Blackbird House*

*Blackbird House* was first begun by Alice Hoffman out of the desire to make up a history for a house she bought on Cape Cod. She wrote several short stories, publishing them in different places, before she started to pull them together into a collection that chronologically followed the history of the house. Although the stories are fabricated, the town of Truro, Massachusetts is not. Perhaps because Truro does exist, Hoffman does not describe the town itself as much as she does in other novels. Instead, the stories are all located on the farm built around the house and in the natural environment of Cape Cod. Nevertheless the imagined community of Truro is developed through the interactions of the people who reside in the house with the townspeople.

When John Hadley first built a house for his family, the idea was to give up the sea and start farming. A few more good catches of fish should enable the family to start the farm and so he braved the British embargo on Cape Cod with his sons in an attempt to get one last good catch. A storm rose that night and the only one to come back was the blackbird fledging that the younger Hadley boy had taken with him. This bird turned white and began to haunt the farm which is perhaps what led to it acquiring the name of Blackbird House. *Blackbird House* is described as a collection of short stories but it can also be viewed as a novel about the house and the successive generations of lives that it is home to.

Each chapter of the book is a new story about the lives of those who call Blackbird House home. In the first chapter Hoffman begins with the building of

the house and the dream of a farm around the time of the Revolution and the following chapters move forward one generation at a time. Sometimes the house remains with the same family for several generations, sometimes it changes owners frequently and sometimes it stands abandoned until a new owner finds it. Across the stories the use of the land changes and the outbuildings around the house are built up and taken down, but certain features remain fixed and the house itself stands through it all.

The stories in the chapters are filled with love, loss, hope and occasionally even redemption. These themes accumulate and combine with recurring motifs and symbols throughout the book to explore the life of the house and the way in which the experiences of those who have lived in it come to influence those who later inhabit it.

### *The Red Garden*

*The Red Garden* is similar to *Blackbird House* in that it too is a collection of interlocking short stories. However, instead of all of the stories being connected by a house, it is the life of the town that develops in each of the chapters. Starting with the small group that goes out to the Berkshires and settles at the foot of Blacktop Mountain, the progressive stories tell us not only about the individual lives and private struggles of the descendants of the founding families but also show the growth and changes of the town. Sometimes influential people who have come to be part of the lore of New England are introduced, such as Johnny Appleseed and Emily Dickinson. In other chapters, the influence of national events such as wars and the Great Depression are explored in terms of the effects they have on life at a local level. Often, the chapters focus on people dwelling in one of the original houses in the town.

The town of Blackwell grows and is shaped by the events that occur in it. Some of these events are forgotten, but others are remembered. The influence of the past is visible not only in official commemoration of it, but also through the stories of the past that are told and shared by the people of the town. These stories are added to and change with time and become myths that are shared by the community.

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