

Fiction

Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*.

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Departing from a representation of the silent or inarticulate female vagrant as simply projection or scapegoat, Marilynne Robinson creates in *Housekeeping* an articulate first-person narrator who is also a female drifter. Although the novel begins with Ruth recounting her childhood years under the care of various female relatives--her mother, her grandmother Sylvia, her two great aunts, and finally her Aunt Sylvie--it eventually turns into a story of how she is forced to leave her grandmother's home in Fingerbone, Idaho, to take up a life of drifting with her Aunt Sylvie, and how her sister Lucille leaves that same house to live with her Home Economics teacher, Miss Royce. During the course of Ruth's narrative, the grandmother's house occupies a role as central as that of the many female inhabitants it shelters. As much as this novel is about the homeless condition, it is also about coming to a new understanding of shelter and the ideology of home. In that context, it is worth noting that although Lucille's departure is voluntary, Ruth and Sylvie's is not: If they want to keep their household intact, they must leave the home they have created.

The 1981 publication of Robinson's novel intersects with a historical moment when sociologists created a category for homeless females, and the media began to exploit and sensationalize the story of the "bag lady" (Golden 85-90). Since then, and in large part even today, female vagrants existed outside of a positivist category. For instance, female transients initially appear to offer a representation that is not dependent on the domestic; however, when woman, so deeply entrenched in the "cult of domesticity," is discovered outside of that realm, she is only made "real" by defining her against that realm. Without a tradition of female transients, vagrants, or tramps, there is only "female homelessness." In contrast to the lack of a clear category for female transients, a long tradition of male transients exists in the figures of tramps, hoboes, and railriders; and when the economy necessitates their mobility, male transients become cultural heroes.

In the 1980s, a number of sociological studies addressing female homelessness appeared. Lesley D. Harman's 1989 study questions the relentless connection between women transients and the home. Harman differs from other contemporary sociologists in that, rather than seeking the reasons for women's homelessness, she questions the status of the traditional nuclear family itself:

The attribution of deficiency, through which it is assumed that homeless women have failed their families, is precisely rooted in a conception of domesticity which is stubbornly inflexible. Perhaps it is the "nuclear family," as an obsolescent institution that is under considerable stress as increasingly unrealistic demands are placed upon it to conform with the myth of home, that is failing. (23)

Harman also considers how female homelessness, as a relatively new social problem, is domesticated: "Linguistically, appropriation, bringing home, and control translate the new into the existing language which in turn serves to familiarize the strange" (15). In line with Harman's redirecting the "problem of the female vagrant" (Woolf 152) to "the notion of home as problematic" (Harman 23), I consider here the possibility of refiguring female vagrancy within the shelter of a changing definition of "home." I suggest a reading of *Housekeeping* that interprets the "final" departure of Ruth and her Aunt Sylvie as part of an ongoing deconstructive process. Given that paradigm, transience as a metaphor for subversion expands to include various forms of shelter, and the transient female's subjectivity need not go homeless; conversely, the home need not be totally and inclusively constructed by the dominant ideology and cultural practice.

One general characteristic of the American bildungsroman is the requirement that a character can reach self-realization only outside the realm of home. To "light out for the territory" has thus become particular to male initiation in American fiction. At first glance, *Housekeeping* appears to be written in the same tradition of escape. Certainly the initial criticism of Robinson's novel reads it as a developmental novel told from a female perspective. I do not intend to reject that reading or to imply that *Housekeeping* is not situated in the tradition of American letters. My contention, rather, is that the novel is concerned equally with escaping and with redefining the domestic: It "burns down," but it also reconstructs. The text that depicts a simple escape from the domestic leaves the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity unaltered; home continues to be aligned with traditional constructions of domesticity and mothering. To posit the home as a constraint to be escaped--or, in other words, to posit home as an opposition to vagrancy--is to continue defining vagrancy in domestic terms.

Whereas the initial articles on the novel tended to critique it in terms of the American canon, specifically in terms of the female bildungsroman, recent criticism cites this novel as an instance in the larger debate on female subjectivity.<sup>(1)</sup> However, because those critics have certain presuppositions about the value of subjectivity that the novel does not share, that results in a "domestication" of Robinson's representation of subjectivity. Robinson creates a first-person female narrator who is in control of her narrative, but at the same time that narrator's wisdom leads her to dismiss not only the integrated "subject," a concept that has always been central to Western humanistic philosophy, but also the primacy of the subject's place in the world. Through the course of her story, Ruth comes to realize that permanence can be found only in impermanence and that presence can be found only in absence.

Robinson's prose, replete with images of water and abandonment, is a constant reminder of the "the life of perished things" (124).

Although a few readers have been aware of the problems involved with critiquing a text that radically undermines conventional values related to the construct and primacy of subjectivity and "home," critics have tended, for the most part, to apply conventional values to an otherwise unconventional narrative. The most extreme example of that domestication can be found in the work of Anne-Marie Mallon, who purports to speak for her readership as well:

Transients and runaways are not among society's favoured or fortunate; and homelessness is a condition that evokes our pity or our tension--depending on how deeply it threatens our own rootedness--but never our assent. Like the townfolk of Fingerbone, we believe that people and things--like children, relationships, jobs, and houses--need to be made secure. We might permit, with tentative indulgence, a "stage" of rootlessness, a year or two of journeying. But ultimately, we will maintain, everyone and everything need a home. (95)

That position--opposing journeying and rootlessness (read homelessness) to home and security--enforces a domestication of Robinson's text.(2) I argue that the text does not ask us to side with casseroles and mittens, nor does it ask us to side with vagrancy. It asks that as readers we attempt to reconstruct our understanding of the material world and, directly related to that, of shelter.

Although most of Ruth's narrative is concerned with her arrival at a (non)place, transience as a metaphor prevails much earlier. As many critics have acknowledged, Housekeeping breaks down binary oppositions such as inside-outside, lost-found; yet those same critics see the departure of Ruth and Sylvie as a clear-cut moment that is different from what has gone on before: because the "homeless" transience of Ruth and Sylvie is set against a conventional notion of "home," their earlier "homeful" vagrancy is negated.(3) I argue, however, that home as conventionally and ideologically defined is destabilized much earlier, and consequently, their transience is enacted in various ways before their "final" departure. Only after their home and the household it contains are threatened from the outside do they "decide" (are forced) to leave and take up drifting. Therefore, recognizing the changing status of the house replaces the nineteenth-century ideal of "domestic bliss" with what might be called a transient definition of home and family. Home does not necessarily mean entrapment, and vagrancy does not necessarily have to mean homelessness. Replacing a conception of home as upholding the dominant domestic ideology with home as a dismantling of the dominant domestic ideology allows for replacing the stereotype of the female vagrant in any of its guises with the female vagrant as a complex subject whose practice refuses to be encoded in any one narrative.

Much of the criticism on Housekeeping posits the house that Ruth's grandfather, Edmund Foster, built as the patriarchal "father-house."(4)

However, it is significant that the house that Edmund builds does not begin as a finished, stable structure. We are told, for example, that the stairway "terminated rather oddly in a hatch or trapdoor, because at the top of the stairs one came face to face with a wall so essential to supporting the roof (which had always sagged somewhat in the middle) that my grandfather could not bring himself to cut another door in it" (47-48). In a narrative that continually evokes the language of entrapment and escape, the "trapdoor" signifies the domestic possibility of fluid foundations. It is an escape mechanism--neither ceiling-floor nor door--built into the structure. We learn that "the hall from the kitchen to the front door sloped rather sharply, though the angle was eased somewhat by a single step midway" (44), that the chest and wardrobe in the bedroom have mismatched legs "to compensate for the slope of the floor" (89), and that the house's "fenestration was random" and its "comers out of square" (74). Because Edmund "had built it himself, knowing nothing whatever of carpentry" (74), the house begins as a "faulty" vehicle of ideology. For example, the stairway is "wide and polished, with a heavy railing and spindle banisters" (47), but only leads to a trapdoor; consequently, it not only calls attention to itself as ornament but at the same time exposes the division between upstairs and down and between the parents' and children's living space. The sloping floors and the random fenestration mark the instability of the domestic narrative.

Other critics have acknowledged the changing status of the house (Paula Geyh provides the most comprehensive interpretation), but they note only those changes apparently effected by Sylvie. However, as Ruth notes, the house is "changed" before Sylvie's return, for it "shifted and settled" (48), and the orchard produced "smaller and wormier apples and apricots and plums" (27). In fact, the house is neither fully representative of patriarchy, nor, later, fully subject to Sylvie's heterodox housekeeping.

Robinson's "unfinished" house undergoes a series of changes that reflect its primary inhabitants: it is dynamic, not static. Furthermore, without the grandfather's presence, this particular house, and its faulty but inherent ideology, seem to recede in both function and importance. Although under the grandmother's care the house remains well-kept, other slippages do occur. For instance, it is made explicit in the first paragraph that Ruth's grandfather built the house, but the many female inhabitants who take up residence in (and who are eventually absent from) the house undermine his carpentry. Moreover, although the house is built by Edmund, it is built for Sylvia.

Without the father, the transformation of the household enacts a transformation of the conventional domestic ideology, especially in terms of the Freudian family drama. It is as if Edmund's death allows the family of women to be "cut free from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement" (13). His death transfers the daughters' gaze back to their mother: "his sudden vanishing had made them aware of her" and "they pressed her and touched her as if she had just returned from an absence" (12). With his death, then, a psychoanalytical reversal occurs with a return to the pre-oedipal phase. The cord that binds the daughters to the symbolic order is cut free and for a short time there is a loss of identity as the daughters

merge into one consciousness, reunited with their mother. In Edmund Foster's time the second floor separates the children from the parents. With him gone, although the children still sleep upstairs and Sylvia downstairs, it is as if all the house's physical divisions, walls and floors, dissolve. That is further exemplified by the merging between mother and daughters. We are told that "the customs and habits of their lives had almost relieved them of the need for speech" (15). However, just as they are encircled further by the structure of the house, so meaning precedes the intuitive tasks they perform. Thus the movement back to the mother is not characterized by dereliction. Although the house as a physical and social structure recedes in importance, it does not totally disappear.

Initially, the house is (inaccurately) associated with security. Sylvia Foster tells Ruth and Lucille to "sell the orchards [...] but keep the house. So long as you look after your health, and own the roof above your head, you're as safe as anyone can be" (27). But the arrival of Sylvie shakes that security: she transforms the house--the house does not transform her. She resists any preceding family narratives, thus allowing a lack of security, inherent in every family narrative, to be exposed and reconfigured. Sylvie becomes "head" of the household, but she does not immediately occupy the master bedroom: The room she sleeps in is not even a fully constructed room but "a sort of narrow dormer with a curtain closing it off from the hallway" (48). When she finally moves into the master bedroom, "her clothes and even her hairbrush and toothpowder [are kept] in a cardboard box under the bed" (102-03). She sleeps clothed, on top of the covers, with her feet on the pillow. As Ruth acknowledges, these are "clearly the habits of a transient" (103), but in this case the transience is contained by shelter.

To put that idea another way, the house itself becomes a transient structure. In particular, the transience is characterized as a partial destruction of the symbolic order and as an acknowledgment of other forces. During a spring flood, the external forces of nature alter the house, but under Sylvie's care nothing is done to restore order. Similarly, the household does not participate in the "restoration of the town" (75). Further, the flood allows the meaning behind the architectural space to change. The second floor, once reserved for children (although at this point in the novel Sylvie is still sleeping in the narrow dormer room), becomes a shared space; Ruth remarks that "[w]e lived on the second floor for a number of days" (61). The activities once reserved for the kitchen and parlor now take place in the bedroom.

Sylvie as the "head" of the household unsettles old patterns of domesticity; for example, she transforms the meaning behind the fenestration of the house. Rather than functioning as a division between the inside and outside, the windows begin to indicate similarity rather than difference. In the evening, Ruth and Lucille "[step] through the door from sheer night to sheer night" (99); most of the windows are without panes (199); and that which is conventionally thought of as belonging outside comes inside: "leaves began to gather in the comers" (84-85). Eventually there are "crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic" (99). Conversely, and following Thoreau's

method of housecleaning, Sylvie takes the "plum-colored davenport into the front yard, where it remained until it weathered pink" (86).

The kitchen window, a central image throughout the history of the house, changes and expands in meaning. Under Sylvia Foster's care, the window is used only in daylight: at night "in the bright kitchen [the] white curtains screen[ed] out the dark" (11). Under Sylvie's care, the curtains no longer have any functional use because the window is also used at night. Because Sylvie "dislike[s] the disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a worldful of darkness" (99), they eat their evening meal in the dark, with the kitchen lights off; consequently, there is no need for curtains. Sylvie and Ruth thus stare "through the warped and bubbled window at the brighter darkness" (100). In this position they occupy a middle-ground: they are neither deceived by the "image of [seeing themselves] in a lighted room," nor are they in the darkness looking into the lighted room and painfully aware of "all the difference between here and there, this and that" (158). The dissolving of threshold and sill expands the "perimeters of [their] attention" (154); nonetheless, they are sheltered in their "wandering."

Not only the physical structure of the house but also the domestic habits of the inhabitants shift. Although most of this indoor transience is attributed to Sylvie, each member of the household, much as in the time after Edmund Foster's death, is affected. Lucille questions Sylvie's strange housekeeping, but Ruth is "reassured by her sleeping on the lawn, and now and then in the car, and by her interest in all newspapers irrespective of their dates, and by her pork-and-bean sandwiches" (103). She believes that "if [Sylvie] could remain transient here, she would not have to leave" (103). However, when Sylvie and Ruth openly affront the town's domestic ideology--arriving in Fingerbone on a freight car after spending the night on the lake in a stolen boat--the town become intent on keeping Ruth "safely within doors" (183).

Ruth and Lucille's truancy precedes and is related to Ruth and Sylvie's journey by freight car. When a week-long absence from school extends into many weeks, Lucille and Ruth are made to live the life of transients; that is, their truancy is presented in terms of transience. Ruth remembers how during that self-imposed banishment "[t]he combined effects of cold, tedium, guilt, loneliness, and dread sharpened our senses wonderfully" (79). As truants--significantly that word is derived from Old French meaning vagabond--Ruth and Lucille's life continues to be characterized by transience: "Where the train tracks intersected the road [they] followed the tracks, which led to the lake and the railroad bridge" (95). The connection between their truancy and the life of transience is solidified further when Ruth explains that "[i]n all our truanies, perhaps we never came to a place where [Sylvie] had not been before us" (110).

Ruth and Lucille's truancy also introduces a closer proximity to the tramps who have always populated Fingerbone. Ruth imagines that she and Lucille are related to the community of hoboes who "built on the shore in the bridge's very shadow" (95). Although the hoboes might drift away only to be replaced by other hoboes, their communal place remains a stable structure throughout

Ruth's narrative. She composes a number of narrative situations in order to make sense of their proximity:

We in our plaid dresses and orlon sweaters and velveteen shoes and they in their suit coats with the vestigial collars turned up and the lapels closed might have been marooned survivors of some lost pleasure craft. We and they alone might have escaped the destruction of some sleek train, some flying shuttle of business or commerce. Lucille and I might have been two of a numerous family, off to visit a grandmother in Lapwai. And they might have been touring legislators or members of a dance band. (96)

Through those micronarratives, a relationship is created between the hoboes and Ruth and Lucille. And in the larger narrative of the novel, a further relationship exists between them, for, like the hoboes, Ruth and Lucille, too, exist on the margins of *Fingerbone*. By incorporating the hoboes into her narrative, Ruth also tells their lives. She makes the invisible visible by uncovering that which should remain covered-up, at least according to the dicta of *Fingerbone*.

Thomas Foster, characteristic of the critics who refuse to read vagrancy as a palpable text in *Housekeeping*, completely disregards the vagrants that exist on the periphery of *Fingerbone*.<sup>(5)</sup> When Foster writes that the grandfather's "ghost is the only figure in the text offered to male readers to situate themselves in opposition to the sheriff, the law, with respect to the events and characters of the narrative" (89), he ignores "the transients [who] wandered through *Fingerbone* like ghosts, terrifying as ghosts because they were not very different from us" (178) and "the two men in plaid jackets and dusty black pants who were sitting on their heels under the bridge" (81). Without a "history," these vagrant men, in Foster's terms, are not "figures" with which the male--but I would also add female--reader can identify. Consequently, the male transients who populate the text are not recognized.

Nevertheless, the male vagrants who populate the text are a palpable presence in Ruth's narrative of the town of *Fingerbone*. As in the novel's deconstruction of domesticity and vagrancy, the opposition between the tramps and the civil order is similarly deconstructed. The hoboes, originally perceived by the grandmother as "whisking children under their coats and carrying them off" (95-96), become the judges of society. As judges they "are nameless souls [who] looked into [the town's] lighted windows without envy," "finding nothing [there] to sustain [them]" (184). Conversely, the probate judge becomes the kidnapping hobo who whisks away children and breaks up families (68, 190).

Similar to the absent male vagrants in Foster's critical narrative, Ruth and Lucille's transience does not figure in the criticism of *Housekeeping*, probably because to include it would diminish the transience of Sylvie and Ruth, around which the critics' narratives are constructed. Ruth and Lucille stay out the entire night, during one of their sojourns into the "wilderness," a sojourn that

prefigures the journey that Ruth and Sylvie make. However, that journey has as much to do with shelter as it does with homelessness. The activities of their day are concerned with the domestic freed from the dominant ideology. They catch perch and then make a fire to cook them. Like their grandfather before them, and the vagrants hovering under the train bridge, they too construct a shelter:

We dragged driftwood halfway out on the point. We used a big stone on its side as one wall, we made back and side walls of driftwood, and we left the third side open to the lake. We pulled down fir limbs and made a roof and floor. It was a low and slovenly structure, to all appearances random and accidental. (114)

Lucille and Ruth's "hut" (115) takes on all the particulars of home: walls, floor, door, and a roof over their heads.

In an argument that echoes Fiedler, Martha Ravits suggests that shelter in all of its various formations serves to confine female development. Within that argument, Ravits views Lucille and Ruth's makeshift shelter as "another version of the house, one that cramps and confines" and one that Ruth must "struggl[e] to get out of" (664). However, in the text, Ruth "scrambles" and Lucille simply "stand[s] up through the roof" (115). Rather than viewing those images as "confinement" I view those shelters--the house in Fingerbone and the hut, to name two---as places where domestic ideology can be re figured and where "universal habitation" extends beyond a patriarchal logos. The pairing of home and woman's confinement is so prevalent in criticism that that "fixed combination" has become what Mieke Bal identifies as a topos in narrative (97). However, Bal further suggests that the topos of a narrative, "may also be disappointed" (97). In Robinson's text the topos of home and female confinement collapses. When the house does contain what might be called their mobile identities, it is comparable to the body confining and limiting the senses. The darkness and silence accompanying their evening meals enable them "to feel [their] proximity with [their] finer senses." (100)

Ruth and Sylvie's journey by freight, the possibility that the town might be losing Ruth to the transient ways of Sylvie, causes a deluge of visits by the sheriff and the pious women of the town. Those representatives of the social order put great pressure on Sylvie's house, so much that she, for fear of losing Ruth, attempts to put up a good front by restoring the lost domesticity. Ironically, that restoration turns into a partial demolition of that order. Sylvie burns everything from newspapers to library books; in effect, she burns the texts that have guided Lucille into the symbolic order. For a brief moment, Sylvie occupies what Luce Irigaray describes as mimicry: while attempting to destroy the language that has trapped them, she reacted to her audience with a stage voice and large gestures. She kept saying, "I don't know why we didn't do this months ago," loudly, as if she thought there were listeners beyond the firelight, among the apple trees.

While conforming to the expectations of the social order, Sylvie "also remain[s] elsewhere" (Irigaray 76). Eventually she attempts to burn down the

house, but only after the realization that to stay in the shelter of the house would be to break up their household.

The attempt to restore or to destroy, or both, the lost domesticity of the grandfather's house fails. The town's inability to tolerate transience ironically forces Ruth and Sylvie into becoming transients; Ruth makes quite clear that "Sylvie and I are not travellers" (216): "we are drifters" (213). They are not allowed to continue reconstructing the domestic within the ancestral-matrilineal home because of the larger order that surrounds that structure. But to live a life of transience, in the context of this text and in the context of sociological studies, does not result in a life that is free of social constraints. When Sylvie and Ruth cross the railroad bridge they are assumed dead by the townspeople of Fingerbone, and although many years have passed since the event of their "death"-escape, they do not return to claim their "identities." Even with the knowledge that "'After seven years they [the law] can't get you for anything,'" they are aware also that "they could always get you for increasingly erratic behaviour" (213).

In her discussion of *Housekeeping*, Sian Mile aligns the reader with King Lear. "We may," she contends, "like Lear, feel compelled to ask for more--`Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again'" (1.i.92) (Mile 135). But what Lear wants to hear from Cordelia is hyperbolic convention, and readers are thankful that Robinson refuses to give us a comfortable narrative. Ruth, not Lucille, is narrating the story of two daughters whose legacy is what they make of it. Lucille creates a subjectivity from the social order, whereas Ruth's subjectivity is contingent upon that which is not. It is difficult to surmise what that "not" is, but in this negativity the self paradoxically expands; it does not diminish:

I learned an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort. [...] I was hungry enough to begin to learn that hunger has its pleasures, and I was happily at ease in the dark, and in general, I could feel that I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one. But then the sheriff came. (204)

The symbolic, in the form of the social and civil order, continuously challenges any possibility of a clean escape for Sylvie and Ruth: Certainly, the newspaper clipping reporting their seeming death, which Sylvie wears pinned inside her jacket, is a constant reminder of the limits imposed on their transience. But those limits are also the means to the narrative that Ruth Stone writes to a world that is constantly attempting to cover up that which is not. Similarly, the interdependence of vagrancy and domesticity, of imaginary and symbolic, is played out in the concluding relationship between Ruth and Lucille. Ruth imagines that she and Sylvie are constantly in Lucille's thoughts: "No one watching [Lucille ...] could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie" (219). But in Ruth's imagining, Lucille, likewise, remains a constant presence; for as Ruth earlier recognizes, loss is the precondition for presence (195). Robinson's characterization of Ruth Stone and Sylvie Fisher suggests that it is the ideology of home, not the homeless, that must be remedied