

“THE DEAR ORDINARY”: THE NOVELS OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

by

ALEXANDER JOHN ENGBRETSON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2013

2013

ALEXANDER JOHN ENGBRETSON

All Rights Reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Alexander John Engebretson

Date

Chair of Examining Committee

Gerhard Joseph

Date

Executive Officer

Gerhard Joseph

Anne Humpherys

Nico Israel

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Abstract

“THE DEAR ORDINARY”: THE NOVELS OF MARILYNNE ROBINSON

by

Alexander John Engebretson

Adviser: Professor Gerhard Joseph

This dissertation is a critical study of contemporary U.S. writer Marilynne Robinson with a focus on her three novels *Housekeeping* (1981), *Gilead* (2004), and *Home* (2009). The purpose of my study is to provide the first comprehensive interpretation and analysis of her literary output and to establish the contexts—biographical, literary, intellectual, religious, and political—which illuminate and inspire her work. In addition to offering detailed readings of each of her novels, my study engages a variety of questions prompted by her work, including questions of regional and religious identity, the intersection of fiction and non-fiction, landscape and environmental ethics, the imagination of subjectivity, and race and gender politics. By focusing solely on Marilynne Robinson, my dissertation offers a holistic understanding of an underappreciated author and makes an implicit argument for her exceptional value as a U.S. novelist and as an object for future scholarship.

Acknowledgments

First off, I want to thank my dissertation committee, Gerhard, Anne, and Nico, for their comments, encouragement, and kindness. I also want to thank the CUNY Graduate Center for the privilege of spending five years studying, teaching, reading, and writing. I am a better scholar, teacher, and, I believe, person as a result my time here. Since we do live in a moment that is increasingly skeptical of humanistic study, when funds are being depleted for public education, it's worth mentioning that without the support of public institutions like CUNY, and California State University at Fullerton, where I received my MA, I would never have been able to pursue my academic interests, let alone complete my doctorate degree. Speaking of Fullerton, I am tremendously grateful to Cornel Bonca for encouraging me to move to New York and go forward with my studies. And for concurring with Cornel—not about New York, but about the going-forward-with-my-studies bit—I'm also grateful to my loving and always-supportive parents.

Finally, as helpful as all of these people and institutions have been, no one has been as crucial to the completion of this project as my wife, Julie. Without her absolute and unwavering commitment to my academic ambitions, and her eight years of emotional, intellectual, moral, and financial support, this study and my Ph.D. would have never happened.

This dissertation is dedicated to Julie, my one.

Table of Contents

Introduction	
The Author: Marilynne Robinson.....	1
Chapter One	
The Romance: <i>Housekeeping</i>	35
Chapter Two	
The Confession: <i>Gilead</i>	96
Chapter Three	
The Novel: <i>Home</i>	153
Afterword.....	216
Notes	217
Bibliography	218

Introduction

The Author: Marilynne Robinson

On December 17th 2007, Marilynne Robinson joined the Biblical scholar and translator Robert Alter for a discussion at New York City's 92nd Street Y. Alter had just published a new translation of the Psalms and the two of them were to read from them, offer commentary, and discuss them as poetry and prayer. During one of their dialogues, the topic turned to the Book of Job, and Robinson asked, "Have you ever wondered whether all the voices in Job are interior voices?" "Are what kind of voices?" Alter replied. "Interior voices," said Robinson. "Interior voices? I'm not sure. That's something I'd want to think about." They both laughed and moved on.

This moment might be taken as a minor note of conversational awkwardness. Or, if considered in a certain light, it may reveal something of Marilynne Robinson's character—her strangeness as an author and thinker. After all, it is strange for an American fiction writer to take the stage with an expert on the Hebrew Bible. Strange that she can competently discuss the cultural traditions of the Ancient Near East and present off-hand interpretations of some of her "favorite" Psalms. It is very difficult to imagine any other recent Pulitzer Prize winner for fiction doing so, or wanting to do so. The comment about Job is equally strange. It's little wonder that Alter is baffled by the suggestion that the voices of Job are taking place within a single consciousness. That kind of deep inwardness, characteristic of the modern self, was unknown to ancient peoples. But this doesn't seem to bother Robinson. Her comment reveals an important line of assumption that runs throughout her work—that the Bible is a book about religious experience, and since experience is, at a fundamental level, the experience of consciousness, The Book of Job might be plausibly conceived as a book taking place within one

mind. Of course, few people would accept those assumptions—Alter probably wouldn't. They are symptomatic of Robinson's strangeness, her adherence to assumptions and intuitions about texts, humans, nature, reality, and God that within the contemporary literary field are hers alone.

But is that all one can say about her? Is this where her value lies, that she is "strange," an "individualist," which might be translated as merely "eccentric," "unfashionable," an "outlier" within contemporary culture? Such an evaluation, if pursued, might bend toward a negative judgment. "Eccentric" becomes "irrelevant," "unfashionable" becomes "reactionary." One might conclude that those essays defending the Puritans and John Calvin in *The Death of Adam* are merely provocations from an extreme intellectual margin. "Strangeness" may be a starting place, but it is very far from the whole story. Like any demanding literary artist, it is exceedingly difficult to generalize about Robinson. This is in part due to the varied nature of her writing, its mix of theme, form, and genre. But it is also temperamental, a personal aversion to the very act of generalization. Throw her into any number of conceptual straightjackets—humanist, feminist, scholar, pagan, journalist, Romantic, American, public intellectual, novelist, Iowa Writers' Workshop instructor, Calvinist, liberal, liberal Protestant, realist, mystic, environmentalist, regionalist, conservative—and she will soon throw it off. To use one of her favorite words, the category will seem "reductive." To use another word, it will not fully account for her "complexity." "My archaic self," she writes,

might have been nothing other than a latter-day pagan whose intuitions were not altogether at odds with, as it happened, Presbyterianism, and so were simply polished to that shape. Or it might have been that I was a mystic by vocation and, despite Presbyterianism, suffered atrophy of my gift in a life where I found little use for it. For all I know I am a mystic now, and simply too close to the phenomenon to have a clear

view of it. In any case I began as a pagan and have ended as one, though only in the sense that I have never felt secure in the possession of the ideas and loyalties that are dearest to me. (*Death* 229-230).

What kind of self-portrait is this? Obviously one that is complex, one comfortable with the kinds of contradictions and tensions present in an identity conceived as both “pagan” and “Presbyterian.” There may even be a latent desire to subvert the very kind of categorizing and generalizing that scholars do, as Robinson, who was trained as a scholar of Shakespeare, knows so well. So perhaps it is best not to begin with the categories that seem so seductive at first, and establish some of what we know as the facts of her life.

A Portrait of the Artist

She was born Marilynne Summers in 1943 in the far-west town of Sandpoint, Idaho. She moved often throughout her early childhood as her father, John J. Summers, followed the jobs in the lumber industry along the Idaho and Washington border, through towns like Coolin, Sagle, and Talache. The work required him to be away for long stretches of time, so Marilynne spent much of her childhood in the company of her mother, Ellen, and her intellectually precocious older brother, David. An introverted and bookish child—she attempted her first reading of *Moby Dick* at age nine—she absorbed the ramshackle intellectual culture of the region, which furnished her with “odds and ends—Dido pining on her flaming couch, Lewis and Clark mapping the wilderness,” as well as Emily Dickinson and, most crucially, the Bible (*When* 87). Although her family was Presbyterian, religion was more an “inherited intuition than an actual fact,” lacking the ethical and intellectual intensity she would later bring to her faith (“The Art of Fiction No. 198”). She attended high school in Coeur d’Alene where she encountered the Latin writers

Horace, Virgil, and Cicero. She would later remark, “I think anyone can see that my style is considerably more indebted to Cicero than to Hemingway” (*When* 87). Her education in the West would mark her for the rest of her life: “I find that the hardest work in the world—it may in fact be impossible—is to persuade easterners that growing up in the West is not intellectually crippling” (*When* 86).

After graduating high school in 1962, she followed her brother off to Rhode Island, where she attended the women’s college Pembroke, formally attached to Brown University. There she studied English with an emphasis on nineteenth-century American literature, bringing her into a deeper relation with authors who would have a major influence on her imagination, including Herman Melville, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. In addition to her literary studies, she took her first writing workshop, submitting her fiction to John Hawkes who, despite his own experimental preferences, gave her favorable feedback and encouraged her to continue writing. After graduating with her B.A. in 1966, she returned to the Pacific Northwest and enrolled in a Ph.D. program in English at the University of Washington. She married, had two sons, and in 1977 she completed her dissertation “A New Look at Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part II*: Sources, Structure and Meaning,” her first major piece of writing. The dissertation asserts the value and coherence of that play mainly through an examination of Shakespeare’s sources and a close reading of the play’s system of metaphor and allusion. It’s worth pausing a moment over the dissertation, since even in this early work it’s possible to detect hints of future developments.

The style of the dissertation resembles her early non-fiction voice, a flat, terse, muscular style that avoids dependent clauses and elevated diction. There is also evidence of some characteristic intellectual concerns, such as a wariness towards Freud and Darwin (“Evolution

did not originate with Darwin, nor was Freud the first to interpret dreams”) and the questioning of reductionism (“When Shakespeare uses the language and imagery of Renaissance or Tudor political theory, there is no reason to imagine that his political thinking begins and ends within the limits of any system or orthodoxy”) (“New Look” 3). Even her choice to focus on such a minor play within the Shakespeare corpus as *Henry VI, Part II*, which she calls “too lonely to be called embattled,” resembles her later desire to rescue another “misunderstood” thinker from the Early Modern period, John Calvin (“New Look” 1). In her close reading of the play, she clearly brings many of the assumptions about metaphor and symbol that she learned from studying nineteenth-century American authors, whose texts offer resonant images to fasten together multiple and often conflicting meanings. Her professor called it an “excellently written and most perceptive dissertation from which Shakespeareans cannot but learn” (“New Look”).

Becoming a Shakespeare scholar, however, was not for Robinson. Throughout her graduate school years she had developed a habit of writing down metaphors on scraps of paper “just to get the feeling of writing in that voice” (Fay 198). The scraps eventually became a bundle. Then one day while dozing in the university library she had a dream of a catastrophic train accident, which she wrote into a short prose piece and showed to her dissertation supervisor. After she graduated with her Ph.D., she took the bundle of metaphors and the train accident piece with her to France, where she taught for a year at the Université de Haute Bretagne in Rennes. As an expatriate, she began piecing together scraps of prose, combining them with memories of her childhood in the American West. Within a year she had a draft of the manuscript that would be her first novel *Housekeeping*. Robinson suspected it was not publishable due to its elevated rhetorical style, extended metaphors, general plotlessness, and gloomy atmosphere. But to her great surprise the first agent that reviewed it decided to represent

her, and the first publisher that read the manuscript, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, decided to publish it. The book won immediate praise upon its publication in 1980, winning the PEN/Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for Best First Novel and the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and it was short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize. More surprisingly still, it proved a bestseller, and was eventually adapted into a film released in 1987 directed by Bill Forsyth. *Housekeeping* remains Robinson's most widely read and critically respected work of fiction. It would be twenty-four years until she published another novel.

In the meantime she went to work as a professor, moving from job to job in a pattern that resembles her itinerant early childhood. She accepted appointments at Washington University (1983), the University of Kent in England (1983-1984), the Fine Arts Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts (1985), Amherst College (1985-1986), the University of Massachusetts (1987), and the University of Alabama (1988). While at Kent, Robinson became intensely interested in the environmental impact of the British nuclear reprocessing plant located at Sellafield. She wrote an essay for *Harper's* magazine which claimed that millions of tons of nuclear materials had been dumped daily into the Irish Sea for over thirty years. Her outrage at the contamination and at Britain for allowing it to happen eventually turned into *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State, and Nuclear Pollution*, published in 1989. Although the book was a finalist for the National Book Award's non-fiction prize, and though it gained a minor reputation within the emerging environmental movement, it remains highly controversial. The book was disparagingly reviewed in *The New York Review of Books* for its use of non-scientific sources and the environmental activist group Greenpeace successfully sued Robinson for libel in Britain where the book was banned.¹

Robinson's professional wandering stopped in 1990 when she accepted a position at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, arguably the most prestigious writing program in the U.S., which continues to be her adopted home. Having divorced a year earlier, Robinson found Iowa City a stable place in which to raise her two children as well as an intellectually nurturing environment where she could continue with a project she calls her "re-education":

It was largely as a consequence of the experience of writing *Mother Country* that I began what amounted to an effort to re-educate myself. After all those years of school, I felt there was little I knew that I could trust, and I did not want my books to be one more tributary to the sea of nonsense that really is what most conventional wisdom amounts to. I am not so naive as to imagine that I have escaped that fate except in isolated cases and small particulars. But the research and criticism I have done have helped me to be of my own mind in some degree, and that was a feeling I had to achieve before I could enjoy writing fiction. (Fay 210)

The product of this re-education was *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. Published in 1998, this collection of contrarian-minded essays offered reevaluations of major figures in intellectual history, including Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and especially John Calvin, as well as incisive inquiries into subjects such as the environment, nineteenth-century American Abolitionists, and the Puritans. The book was also significant for its overt religious commitment. Robinson announced herself a "liberal Protestant" and this perspective informs many of the essays in the book which explicitly treat religious themes or build argument proceeding from theological assumptions, particularly the idea of human exceptionalism. Despite the unpopularity of her views, and the unconcealed religious seriousness of the book, it was mostly well received by popular press.²

Since *The Death of Adam*, Robinson's reputation has steadily gained ground. She has become a popular lecturer both in the U.S. and abroad and a much more visible force in the national literary scene. In 2004, she published her second novel, *Gilead*, an epistolary work about an aging Congregationalist pastor in a small Iowa town, that won the hearts of both the public and prize committees, earning her the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. *Home*, a companion novel to *Gilead*, was published in 2008, winning the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2009 for the best Anglophone novel written by a woman. In 2010 she accepted an invitation to give the Terry Lectures at Yale University on the relation between two of her favorite topics, religion and science, which were published in 2010 under the title *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self*. Another collection of essays, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* was released in 2012. This flurry of artistic and intellectual activity shows little sign of abating as Robinson turns seventy next year.³

Robinson as Fiction Writer

The first question that anyone working on Marilynne Robinson's writings has to ask is how to approach the generic diversity of her writings. At present she has written three works of fiction, *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home*, and four books of non-fiction, *Mother Country*, *The Death of Adam*, *Absence of Mind*, and *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. This combination of essay and fiction raises some difficult questions: What is relationship between the essays and the novels? Which genre defines her value as a writer? Since she has produced much more non-fiction than fiction, isn't she best considered a journalist, scholar, or public intellectual and not a novelist?

This study focuses exclusively on Robinson as a fiction writer. The phrase “fiction writer” is carefully chosen. As I argue later on, “novelist” is not the best term for what Robinson is, at least in light of her first two books of fiction. It carries specific generic associations which apply to part of her output but not the whole. The reasons for focusing on the fiction are several. The first is practical: There is simply more to discuss with the fiction. The critical questions that can be asked about an essay are limited. An essay, especially the kind of polemical essays that Robinson’s writes, can be analyzed in terms of the argument being made, how that argument relates to other arguments, and how relevant contexts inform that argument. One can also offer a critical judgment about whether the argument is successful or not. While such an analysis has its place, and may in the future prove valuable to the study of Robinson’s work, it would ignore the rich suggestiveness and ambiguities of her fiction. There is simply more to say, more to unpack, more analytic possibilities in *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home* than in the non-fiction.

The other reason is that this study is the first to consider Robinson’s work as a whole, and as such has to respond to a particular set of burdens and responsibilities. Unlike a study of Shakespeare or James Joyce, where the value of the writing is already assumed, Marilynne Robinson’s literary value has yet to be fully established, especially within the academy. Because this is a first study, the question of literary value cannot be ignored. In order to establish her value it is essential to focus on that part of her output where the value of her work resides. This study argues that her value and reputation rests on her fiction.

This opinion is based on a private aesthetic judgment—I enjoy Robinson’s fiction and believe it ranks among the best in contemporary American letters—and a practical judgment about the way literary scholarship works. Typically scholarly value is ascribed to literary works that raise more questions, generate more ambiguities, and contain more complexities than

simpler, more conventional works. Scholars value texts that have more potential for generating new interpretations than other works. When faced with a generically diverse *oeuvre* like Robinson's, scholars will typically gravitate toward the genre that shows more scholarly potential. It is not that the so-called "minor" works are "bad," it is that they lack in a kind of density, richness, and ambiguity that makes them less enticing as an object of scholarship. In the case of Robinson, her fiction exhibits characteristics that recommend competing interpretations and rewards scholarly inquiry. Another way to frame this is that Robinson's fiction meditates, inquires, and speculates, while her non-fiction argues and offers polemics. Both are sides of her identity as a writer, but the former invites literary analysis while the latter invites rebuttal.

This does not mean that her non-fiction is irrelevant to this study. Rather than giving the essays their own independent inquiry, they will instead serve as a means to illuminate the fiction. Much of the scholarship on Robinson uses the essays in this way and I follow along in this tendency. The value of the essays for this study is as an archive that hints at autobiographical details, artistic influences, and political opinions that may underlie and inform the fiction. The essays, along with her many interviews and public appearances, constitute a rich layer of suggestion, which can shed light on various questions and interpretative problems that the fiction raises.

The other major dilemma along these lines is the question of the publishing gap between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, and whether Robinson's fiction ought to be considered as a unified career or whether her work falls into two distinct phases, say "early" and "late." This important question is something I address in detail in Chapter Two, under the sub-section "Minding the Publishing Gap." There I advance an argument for an understanding of Robinson's total fictional output as one of "development," with *Housekeeping* having much more in common

with the later two fictions than has previously been recognized. This argument is also implicit in the structure of this study. One Chapter devoted to each of the novels suggests not two phases but a whole career. And within each Chapter, the analysis is sensitive to the ways each of the three novels interrelate and echo one another, an argument again for Robinson's career as characterized by development rather than disjunction.

The Question of Bias

It is a curious fact that Robinson's work has been widely ignored in the scholarship of contemporary fiction. Of course, most contemporary fiction writers do not have book-length studies devoted to their work. But many in fact do, thanks to such scholarly book series as the University of South Carolina's "Understanding Contemporary Authors" series and others. Even if we were to believe the Pulitzer or National Book Award prize committees and say that Robinson's value was based on the accrual of major literary awards, it is surprising that an author so publically decorated has such a meager scholarly showing.

There are several reasons for this neglect, the most obvious of which is the already-mentioned twenty-four year exile from fiction. The majority of the scholarship on Robinson concerns her first book *Housekeeping*, which makes sense because it was published in 1981, giving scholars plenty of time to develop competing interpretations. The other important reason for the focus on *Housekeeping* was that it raises questions about gender which were—and still are—valued within humanities research in the wake of the feminist movement. Presumably if Robinson continued writing novels with similar thematic content, the scholarship on her work would look very different. But the twenty-four year break between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* has given an odd shape to the scholarship, heavily weighted to the beginning of her career. A

quite practical-sounding narrative arises out of this recognition: an odd career will create an odd shape to the scholarship, and, moreover, there has not been enough time since the publication of *Gilead* in 2004 to adequately map Robinson's fictional output.

This narrative is plausible but inadequate. Another competing thesis is that there are biases within the academy which have led to the neglect of Robinson's fiction. Might the omission of Robinson from scholarly attention not be the result of attitudes within academic culture that conflict with the content of Robinson's writings? This is a tricky question, since there are too many reasons attention might not extend to a particular authors. And long periods of scholarly neglect are very common within the history of American letters, with Emily Dickinson and Herman Melville being the two paradigmatic examples. But the "academic bias" narrative against Robinson has enough plausibility that briefly outlining it here is worthwhile. Perhaps the common theme of this bias is the perception that Robinson is conservative, either politically, aesthetically, or both.

The most obvious source of this perception is religion. Beginning with *The Death of Adam* essays, and continuing with the late fiction, Robinson publically identified as a Christian. In the eyes of the mainstream of the academy, a religious identity is viewed with suspicion, at once intellectual suspicion—how is it possible to be religious and accept modernity?—and perhaps more crucially political suspicion. Since 1979, the year Jerry Fallwell founded the Moral Majority, Evangelical Christians have played an important role in American politics, serving as a core constituency of the Republican Party and rallying behind such "family values" issues as ending abortion, banning gay marriage, and strict drug control. Needless to say, the majority of the academy has not looked kindly on this political development. Within this political context, religious identities are immediately suspected of being conservative, and if

Christian, aligned with the Evangelical Right. So, even though Robinson's Christian identity is unaffiliated with the Evangelical movement—indeed she has criticized them harshly in her essays—and despite the fact that many of her political opinions would be generally agreeable to liberals within the academy, her religious identity, her intellectual interest in theology and Biblical scholarship, and the overt religious themes of *Gilead* and *Home*, appears backwards and conservative, and so remains suspect.

The second possible source of bias is nationalism. In her essays on the Puritans and the abolitionists, her frequent praise of Abraham Lincoln, and her fictions' dialog with nineteenth-century American authors like Whitman and Emerson, Robinson projects an older, supposedly outmoded sense of national identity. For her, the privileged region of America remains New England, and the most important cultural strain is the Puritan legacy. Of course, this narrative was commonplace up until the 1970s when different narratives of American identity emerged. Within American studies today, national identity is viewed along multicultural lines, acknowledging the plurality of American cultures, and within a global context, seeing America identity within a much broader Euro-American "Atlantic" context. Robinson has implicitly rejected these narratives, preferring an idea of nationhood with clear borders and a defined sense of national culture. She has an almost Whitman-esque, nineteenth-century enthusiasm for the idea of the nation-state. Like her religious identity, her sense of national identity, of projecting herself as an "American" author, seems, to an academy shaped by multiculturalism and an emerging global consciousness, conservative at best and at worst dangerous or harmful. Robinson confidently touts the virtues of the nation within a time when the academy could not be more skeptical of nationalist claims.

The third and last possible source concerns aesthetics. Robinson's fiction appears free of any taint of modernist influence. There seems to be little anxiety about "making it new," about innovating new formal structures, or any evident anxiety about the nature of representation. Neither does she seem to care for the dark tonality of some modernisms, the *Waste Land* despair or the ironic black humor of the postmodernists. There is an accessibility to Robinson's prose, a comfort with the conventions of realism. And because the academy has a strong preference for the modernist tradition of difficulty—difficulty is often taken as a mark of seriousness—it is possible that scholars view Robinson's aesthetic as lacking substance. She may appear either technically naïve or excessively populist. Her style thus marks her as unworthy of serious scholarly consideration.

These biases, along with the publishing gap between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, combined to form a critical blind spot which this study seeks to correct. Each one of these attitudes is false an important way. If studying Robinson's fiction does nothing else, it helps question some fundamental biases within the academy, especially with regard to authors who appear in some way "conservative." Does a lively engagement with previous literary traditions mean aesthetic obsolescence? Are religious identities always politically regressive? Is accessibility a sign of intellectual and aesthetic innocence? Robinson's work raises these questions, and it also has implications for how the post-war American canon is constructed. If such a novel sensibility as Robinson's was excluded, it would unnecessarily limit our understanding of this highly diverse period.

Resisting Modernism

As “strange” or “unfashionable” as Robinson’s fiction seems, it is a product of a particular time and place, a response to a particular set of cultural tensions and anxieties. Just like every other American author after World War Two, Robinson had to respond to the cultural inheritance of modernism. Many felt they could not write poetry the same way after T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, or to write novels the same way after James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. If the term “modernism” is applied more broadly to other cultural trends, it was difficult even to live the same way after Sigmund Freud said the self was the product of subconscious forces, or after Charles Darwin’s naturalistic account of human origins. By the time post-war American authors went off to college in the 1950s and 60s, the modernist aesthetic and intellectual inheritance had become orthodoxy. It was their particular burden to come to terms with it, a struggle that took place in humanities departments across the country.

One of those young writers was Marilynne Robinson whose idiosyncratic response to modernism would prove to have a definitive impact on the future course of her writing. Indeed, her skepticism concerning modernism, her sense that it is aesthetically, ethically, politically, and even metaphysically problematic, is essential for understanding the character and motivations of her work. Unlike her “postmodern” contemporaries, who critique the naiveté of modernism, just as the modernists critiqued the naiveté of the Victorians and Edwardians, Robinson rejects major aspects of the modernist inheritance altogether. Her project is an attempt to push back through modernism to recover and reimagine older cultural traditions from nineteenth-century American literature, Protestantism, and Renaissance humanism. The result is an aesthetic and intellectual project that critiques modernism while charting a separate course from it. The desire—or perhaps, the fantasy—galvanizing Robinson’s project is to make modernism a marginal cultural

phenomenon. She wants to push Eliot and Pound, Freud and Darwin to the side and let the traditions and values that she believes in to shine once again.

Some definitions of terms are in order, particularly the loaded term “modernism.” Of course, any attempt at a stable definition is a mug’s game, even if scholars agree that modernism names not a homogeneous movement but a range of heterogeneous aesthetic and cultural tendencies. In the United States this movement was carried forward within the various institutions responsible for disseminating culture, most especially the university. As Fredric Jameson notes, in the first half of the twentieth century high modernism “conquered the university, the museum, the art gallery network, and the foundations” (1961). The fact that something fundamental changed within these institutions, that it was inspired by cultural tendencies that emerged from 1900-1945, and that it might be labeled “modernist,” is a good starting place for an understanding of the term, though still far from specific.

Within the context of this study, “modernism” might be best understood as a specific climate of ideas, texts, and attitudes present within the American university circa 1960. In English departments, the modernist influence was felt in the general acceptance of modernist writers like Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot’s essays and poems. The primary literary-critical method was also modernist in origin: the New Critic’s close reading practices, whose influence was beginning to wane in the early 1960s. The most fashionable thinkers would all have been, broadly speaking, modernist: Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche. B.F. Skinner’s behaviorism was popular in psychology departments, Max Weber in sociology, and Darwin in biology. These are the writers whom Robinson encountered while at Pembroke College, an institution dominated by a diverse array of cultural and intellectual trends that may be grouped under the rubric of “modernism.” And these are the writers that Robinson

would spend most of her adult life interrogating. She was of the generation just prior to the wave of literary “theory,” and there is little evidence that she has any acquaintance with the influential post-war French writers normally grouped within “theory,” nor is the “post-modern” a particularly useful rubric for thinking about her work. The most important cultural anxieties for Robinson are the aesthetic ideology of the Eliot-Pound strain, the shifting definitions of the self whose figurehead is Freud, and secularization.

It is striking given her characteristic generosity that she has absolutely nothing good to say about T.S. Eliot in her essays and interviews. Robinson would directly address Eliot in a 1985 *New York Times* article “Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy.” Written in response to *Times* essays by Robert Dunn and E.L. Doctorow which criticized American writers for lacking political seriousness, Robinson’s essay brushes away their concerns for a much broader critique of American historical consciousness. The question of history, and the myths that inform our sense of it, lead her to the question of the influence of Eliot’s modernism and its historical imagination. She writes:

Take courtly and ecclesiastical culture as culture indeed, and modern, mass and democratic influences as anti-culture, create explicit or implicit contrasts—and you have a modernist poem. *The Waste Land* epitomizes this method, exposing the vulgarity of the lower-class lovers in the boat on the Thames by invoking Shakespeare’s Enobarbus’s North’s Plutarch’s Cleopatra on her barge. Shakespeare looked out on a reechier Thames than ever Eliot did—his theater was downwind of a river so foul that the authorities left the actors and bearbaiters who did business there largely unmolested. The vision of beauty Shakespeare conjures when he describes Cleopatra comes straight from a book, and one more remote from his experience by far than his was from Eliot’s. He could as

well have pointed the same sort of contrast Eliot did, if he had been less sophisticated. But that very play, *Antony and Cleopatra*, is about history as myth and artifice. Shakespeare, unlike Eliot, took into account the nature of the material he was dealing with. (34)

She continues:

The idea at the heart of modernism is that once beauty and meaning bloomed in the meadows of experience, heigh-ho: viz., the fine things they said and the pretty things they made. Look where you will, you will find no such dewy meadows in this world. Therefore, everything has somehow changed disastrously. Consciousness is a nuisance, a fright, a disappointment—this is something new under the sun, the “modern” condition. A premodern consciousness was, presumably, as sound and shapely as a good pear. This notion is so widely approved it hardly seems to require proof—yet, starting at Gilgamesh and reading forward, I find no evidence that consciousness has ever been a comfortable experience. (“Writers” 34)

It is telling that Robinson associates all of modernism, its very “heart,” with the Eliotic variety, where nostalgia and disappointed consciousness reign.

Almost ten years later, in her interview with *Contemporary Literature*, Robinson would return to the theme of modernism’s relation to history and to the exact same contrast of Eliot and Shakespeare:

Robinson: There’s this strange nihilism as if—again to talk about modernism—it’s as if modernists expressed loyalty to earlier values by being contemptuous of anything presently existing. As if you’re T.S. Eliot and you want to say, Shakespeare was a wonderful poet, what you do is steal some Shakespeare and set it in a scene of desolation.

Well, of course Shakespeare *wrote* in a scene of desolation, but the only way of magnifying the grandeur of this lost past is by heaping contempt on whatever's presently existing. This is completely—it's almost infantile. It's a ridiculous way to proceed, but it's had an enormous impact on the imagination. And I think it's produced a resignation almost to the point of connivance to the process of actually acting these things out, actually debasing the world.

Q: How would one write about these things without either nostalgia or contempt?

Robinson: The modern understanding of the world was prepared long before the specific conditions of our life in the world. People began writing this way before the First World War. I mean something like Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which comes right after the First World War, talking about the degraded city and the dirty river and everything. The reason Shakespeare had that side of the river to himself was because it was a sewer and the wind blew toward his theater and the air was so foul that the authorities wouldn't bother to enforce the laws there. When the wind blew the other way, the Parliament had to be evacuated. In those terms Eliot hadn't seen anything, and it was just ignorance on his part that he imagined that he was contrasting Shakespeare's experience with his own.

(250)

While there does appear to be an almost visceral dislike of Eliot—the repetition is striking, as well as how long Robinson held the exact same view—Robinson does have some specific, intellectual problems with him.

Eliot along with Ezra Pound stand as the literary exemplars of three important aesthetic developments she finds questionable: a self-conscious internationalism, a sense of historical crisis, and the privileging of difficulty. Many lines from Eliot's essays could be cited as

evidence of this ideology. The internationalism is found in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” where he talks about knowing “the mind of Europe” (1093). As for a sense of historical crisis, there is “Ulysses, Order and Myth” and “the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (177). And “The Metaphysical Poets” advances aesthetic difficulty: “We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult” (1104). More suggestively, however, is the way in which this ideology is embodied within the aesthetic itself. *The Waste Land* is the ideal poem for locating the aesthetic ideology of the Eliot-Pound strain, not only because it is one of the most widely-read and influential modernist poems, one Robinson probably read as an undergraduate, but also because Eliot and Pound collaborated on the poem. It is the product of two men who shared a similar, distinctly modernist sensibility:

Winter kept us warm, covering
 Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
 A little life with dried tubers.
 Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee
 With a shower of rain; we stopped in the colonnade,
 And went on in sunlight, into the Hofgarten,
 And drank coffee, and talked for an hour.
 Bin gar keine Russin, stamm' aus Litauen, echt deutsch.
 And when we were children, staying at the archduke's,
 My cousin's, he took me out on a sled,
 And I was frightened. (*Complete* 37)

The self-conscious internationalism is immediately evident in the polyglot shifting between English and German, suggestive of the cultural and linguistic bewilderment of exile as well as the international character of London, the metropolis which Eliot and sometimes Pound, following Henry James, called home. The sense of historical crisis is figured in the seasons, metaphors for the spiritual “dryness” Eliot intuited in a post-Christian modernity. Crisis is also formally embodied by disjunctive movement of the verse, reflective of the spiritual fragmentation that has supposedly displaced a sense of cultural unity. The difficulty of this verse is infamous. The reader is thrown into disorientation through the instability of the lyric voice, rapidly shifting between the third-person, “we,” and “I,” and the absence of any exposition or sustained development of images.

The result of these tendencies is an aesthetic whose dominant emotions are grief, anxiety, guilt, and doubt. As will become clear once we turn to Robinson’s work, she is on every level opposed to this ideology. Indeed, a fair characterization of her own aesthetic is as an anti-*Waste Land* aesthetic: nationalist and domestic as opposed to internationalist and exilic, an attitude of openness toward the possibilities of history as opposed to a sense of crisis and decline, and stylistic simplicity and accessibility as opposed to difficulty and exclusiveness. The dominant emotional quality of her work is also anti-*Waste Land* in character insofar as she tends to avoid anxiety, perhaps the definitive modernist affect. As she told the *Paris Review*, “I probably experience less anxiety than is normal. People who are literate and prosperous by world standards nevertheless choose anxiety. I consider that kind of anxiety to be unspent energy, energy that goes sour because it is not spent” (“The Art of Fiction”). Instead, her work expresses a kind of emotional stoicism, which one critic aptly called a “fierce calm,” a temperament and tone whose origins lie in the Reformed Protestant tradition (“Acts of Devotion”). Her stoical

tone is among the least contemporary and therefore among the most unfashionable aspects of her work. While many of her near and far contemporaries have carried forward the anxiety of *The Waste Land*—symptomatic are the paranoia of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, or the deliriousness of David Foster Wallace or Zadie Smith—Robinson, by contrast, seems calm and relatively free from the frenzied pace of change in contemporary life.

Her other major problem with the Pound-Eliot strain goes beyond aesthetics and into politics. *The Waste Land*'s anti-liberal political bias is clear, since the poem exudes the kind of difficulty and allusiveness only legible by a highly sophisticated, educated audience. This suggests that poetry is a kind of exclusive discourse available only to a kind of cultural aristocracy, which the poem seems designed to help create. Although *The Waste Land* does borrow from mass culture—"O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag"—it is framed as degenerate form of culture, another symptom of decline, which perfectly aligns with Eliot's opposition to any democratic influence in culture (41). Robinson addressed the politics of modernism directly in an interview:

The idea of democracy was something that inspired enthusiasm. But it seems to me that the elitist model of culture just overwhelmed American society in the Twentieth Century. People like Pound and Eliot and so on were the enthusiasts of elitism for years and years and years before anything happened to criticize that view, which was a political view. And they taught the idea that democracy and cultural freedom could not accommodate each other. Eliot wrote about that explicitly, Pound talked about that explicitly, it happened over and over again among modernists, the idea that true culture was being crushed and destroyed by Whitman's masses. I think it's ungenerous, fashionable, small-minded thinking that has overwhelmed all the resistance. (237-238)

In this way Robinson is part of a great wave of post-war artists and writers who reacted strongly against the perceived elitism of modernism. Indeed, much of the great artistic energy of the post-war period stems from a reaction to the perceived aristocratic ethos and anti-liberalism of modernism. An egalitarian impulse, an attempt to make art more engaged with democratic mass culture, can be found across the arts in the post-war period. Thomas Pynchon, Frank O'Hara, and Andy Warhol are just three examples of artists who attempted to integrate and interrogate forms of mass culture, and helped initiate the post-war breakdown of the boundary between "high" and "low" art, a distinction crucial to certain varieties of modernism. While Robinson sits uncomfortably within this group, since her work lacks traces of 1960s counterculture, she nevertheless should be considered a part of this wider egalitarian cultural tendency. Given these overt aesthetic and political disagreements, it is difficult to imagine Robinson's project taking the shape that it did without the influence of Pound's and especially Eliot's version of modernism on American culture.

In addition to the Pound-Eliot strain, Robinson's project also responds to the shifting definitions of the self that took place early last century and continue today. This is a highly complex cultural development, but only a brief sketch is necessary for understanding Robinson's intervention. Prior to modernist skepticisms, the dominant assumption about the self within modernity was that it was a stable, unified whole, capable of knowing its intentions and acting rationally. This was the modern self, sometimes called the liberal self. It was private, individuated, and endowed with free will. First birthed in the Reformation and greatly enlarged and secularized during Romanticism, this idea of the self was happily received by nineteenth-century Americans, especially by the sons and daughters of northeastern Protestant elites. The

self for them was something to be optimistic about: Whitman celebrated himself, Emerson relied on the self, and Dickinson dwelt in possibilities.

Around the turn of last century this sense of optimism began to change. Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) is widely credited with beginning a wave of skepticism against the modern self, though his "dream book" was really building on intuitions already found within his culture, in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Nevertheless, Freud's theories were responsible for a revolution in subjectivity. While he has been surpassed within present-day psychology, his view of the self has largely won the day. Rather than the traditional view of the self as a rational whole, Freud viewed the self as irrational and divided. Primal subconscious forces, usually traceable back to sexuality, were the motor of the self, not rationality. In other words, the self was not fundamentally in control of itself, meaning that it could not be wholly trusted, let alone "celebrated" as Whitman would have it. Freud's ideas inspired further skepticisms of the self after 1945. Some thinkers like Michel Foucault would go so far as to posit a "death of the subject" in order to debunk what they saw as the illusion of bourgeois individualism. The autonomous self was a cultural mystification which simply persuaded people that once they "had" a unique private identity. Other thinkers like Richard Dawkins followed Darwin to claim that the self as illusory, since organisms exist fundamentally to transfer genetic information to the next generation.

Robinson's work evinces a fundamental disagreement with the entire tradition of skepticism against the self. She believes the Freud-Darwin lineage to be excessively pessimistic, often reductionist, and ultimately harmful, contributing not only to a kind of anti-humanistic culture but also to a potential political problem. One of her largest concerns is what it would mean for the U.S. to lose the humanist assumptions that have undergirded important aspects of

the culture, from liberal arts education to America's loftiest political ideals, for example, that "all men are created equal." Robinson seeks to offer an alternative by reviving a religious sense of the mystery and sanctity of the individual human person and especially of human consciousness. It is consciousness that is sacred for Robinson, and any tradition of thought that excludes the primacy of lived, felt, phenomenological experience is ethically flawed. Thus, she stands in a long line of authors and thinkers, beginning for Robinson in the Early Modern period with John Calvin and Shakespeare, who understand the self as possessing depth, dignity, and complexity. When asked whether she remains "loyal to an old humanism," she replies:

I don't even feel it as loyalty—I don't feel any conflict, any temptations in other directions. I don't understand. I watch culture, I'm sort of interested by it, it swims past me, and it seems to me that for a very long time people have been addicted to low-level, grinding pain for some reason, and I think that this begins with *modernism*. The idea is that if something gives you any recognizable form of human pleasure, you've taken the easy way or you're deceiving yourself or you're engaging in nostalgia or something like that. The insistence on discarding honorable notions on the grounds that now we've outlived the time when we can enjoy them—that's not tolerable. One of things that I hate about all that is the coerciveness of it—we now must think this. I'll think what I want to think, when; I didn't sign any paper that committed me to think like my contemporaries. I'll do what I want. (Shaub 244, my italics)

The final major strain of disagreement between Robinson and the modernists involves secularization. The tension between traditional religion and secularism has been experienced by artists and authors at least since in the middle of the nineteenth century when Ludwig Feuerbach first claimed that God was a human creation, rather than vice versa. Of course, the tradition of

skepticism against Christian authority goes back much further than that, beginning with such Enlightenment philosophers as Spinoza and Hume. Not unlike the skepticisms of the self, there are essentially two lineages of contemporary religious skepticism. The first descends from the rigorous atheisms of the Continent, in the influential writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. Though these three thinkers differ in their approaches, they do agree that religion is a kind of illusion, for Marx a form of “false consciousness,” for Freud an infantile emotional need for a powerful Father, and for Nietzsche a European cultural illusion ending in the “death of God.” The other tradition is the naturalist-rationalist, which has had a wide spread influence within Anglo-American culture. Rationalist thinkers do not think religion is so much an illusion as it is irrational, a superstitious belief in nonsense.

Robinson offers an alternative to these atheisms by promoting a peculiar and idiosyncratic form of liberal Reformed Protestantism. Much more will be said about her beliefs and their influence on her fiction within the Chapters. For now though it is important to note that Robinson takes the rationalist critique far more seriously than those that believe religion is an illusion. This is largely the result of her being an American, where the rationalist arguments have found a large, popular audience. Robinson has argued forcefully for the compatibility between reason and religion, weighing in frequently on the religion-versus-science debates. Her basic complaint against the rationalist defenders of science is that they make claims of absolute certainty, capital-T Truth, usually through some form of reductionism. Being absolutely certain by reductive means assumes a view of reality that is essentially simple and humanly knowable, a view Robinson rejects. Her belief is that reality is essentially complex and mysterious, overwhelming the mind’s capacity to understand it and language’s ability to represent it. She is absolutely certain about uncertainty. In her view, reductionism is a coercive attempt to shut

down other ways of knowing, like literature's or religion's way of knowing. What Robinson wants is for the rationalist defenders of science is to take off the mask of positivism and admit it is a human endeavor, subject to error and limits like any other human endeavor. She does not want to do away with science so much as humble it. If its claims to certainty became tentative instead, it might open science up to the reality of mystery where certain varieties of religion and poetry dwell.

In her resistance to modernism on these many fronts, Robinson resembles another twentieth-century author with some unfashionable views, the poet W.H. Auden. Indeed, she actually has much more in common with Auden than many of her religious or quasi-religious contemporaries like John Updike, Toni Morrison, or Don DeLillo. Not only do Auden (after the 1930s) and Robinson share a personal commitment to Christianity, they are also united in their resistance to the modernist reduction of the individual to amoral forces. As Edward Mendelson in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* puts it, Auden "resisted the tendency characteristic of his time to perceive human beings as products of collective, instinctive, and archetypal forces, rather than as individuals who think, choose, and feel" (xv). Moreover, Auden's attitude toward history in which he refused to idealize the past enabled him to revive traditional poetic forms without modernist nostalgia or irony, just as a similar attitude allows Robinson to reimagine the languages of American romanticism and theology without nostalgia or irony. Their work shares a populist appeal. Auden's rhymes and colloquialisms and Robinson's later "plain" style of diction and scenic presentation invite a wide, diverse audience. Mendelson's comment that "Auden never imagined he deserved anything better than the present" applies equally well to Robinson (xvi). For critics of Auden, and to a certain extent of Robinson, these positions have led to confusion and sometimes dismissal from those who give assent to modernist myths about

the imaginative superiority of the artist or the regretful isolation of exile. Auden and Robinson refuse these myths, adopting a sense of shared humanity which asserts the idea of the unique individual without claiming that the individual is any better or worse than any other person. They write not from the perspective of the lonely exile but as citizens, standing firmly within the nation-state and concerning themselves with the ethical dynamic between the unique individual and his or her neighbor as well as the citizen-state relationship. The critic's task when reading Auden or Robinson is not to judge them based on modernist norms but to read them as offering an alternative to those norms grounded in older humanist assumptions. In Auden's skeptical attitude toward much of the modernist inheritance, he is the nearest recent literary artist to the spirit of Robinson's work.

To make another comparison, Robinson's response to modernism differs fundamentally from many of her so-called "post-modern" contemporaries. Her response is essentially *moral* in the sense that she believes that the content and character of modernism is harmful, dehumanizing, wrong. This is not the case with authors like John Barth who in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" brackets questions of morality and views the problem of modernism as one of *technique*. The most important question for Barth is how to build upon the technical innovations of modernism and be technically "up-to-date." The most important question for Robinson is whether the values and attitudes of modernism are good or bad. What motivates Robinson's writing is not to be innovative, original, or technically up-to-date, but rather to offer an alternative set of values, attitudes, and affects to what she believes is the dominance of modernist culture.

So, it is true that Robinson has fundamental disagreements with the tendencies of modernism outlined above, and that the purpose of her writing is to work against them and

imagine an alternative. But it is also true that she does at least tacitly accept some aspects of modernism. One example is the highly self-conscious craft that is involved in the writing of her fiction, evidenced by her insistence on formal unity. In this way she continues the modernist stance of the writer-as-craftsman inherited from Henry James and Ernest Hemingway, perhaps symptomatic of her employment by the Iowa Writers' Workshop, the famous perpetuator of the "craftsman" myth. Another example can be found in Robinson's dissertation where she practices and therefore implicitly approves of the close reading habits which were directly descended from the critical assumptions of T.S. Eliot. One final example is that Robinson is on very good terms with some authors labeled "modernist," in particular the poet Wallace Stevens whose phrase from "Of Modern Poetry" about "the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice" is often approvingly quoted by Robinson (239). Given these examples, the idea that Robinson took nothing from modernism, that her writing is somehow "purified" from the "taint" of modernism, simply will not work. Framing Robinson as a saint of the American vernacular would ultimately prove reductionist. It is much more reasonable to see her as negotiating the modernist inheritance, accepting certain minor aspects and rejecting other major tendencies. The question for critics of Robinson is which response—what she accepts or what she rejects—has a greater impact on what is *distinctive* about her writing. And the answer to this must be that her opposition to some of the major tenets of modernism has a far greater impact on the distinctive features of her literary identity than the relatively minor aspects of modernism that she and many of her contemporaries tacitly accept.

How does one then characterize her motivations for rejecting modernism? What is behind her discomfort with the modernist label? When an interviewer commented that *Housekeeping* was "in some ways, this is almost a modernist project," Robinson replied, "I think,

though, it's modernist in the sense that Dickinson is so often a modernist" (in Schaub 239). Several narratives of motivation present themselves. Her opposition may seem to mark her as an isolated provincial in a lonely quest against urban centers of culture. Or perhaps she is a reactionary attempting to return to an outmoded tradition. While these characterizations are tempting, they are difficult to maintain under scrutiny. Robinson's solution to reimagine older cultural traditions may appear to be a conservative strategy, perhaps even a fear-based reactionary one. But the only way this charge could stand is by insisting on a crude form of cultural history, such that, for example, modernism *entirely replaced* the Romanticism or Victorianism that stood before it. If this is a good model of history, then it would be appropriate to characterize Robinson as conservative, and her project as expressive of nostalgia. However, it is more accurate to see cultural history as consisting of dominant and subordinate strains, like major and minor tributaries all feeding into one great river. Perhaps the tributaries that most interest Robinson, American Romanticism, Protestantism, Renaissance humanism, have run a little dry in recent years, especially in literary circles, but they do nevertheless trickle into the river of U.S. culture and are therefore eligible of being realized and reimagined without nostalgia.

The other major complication to characterizing Robinson as a reactionary is her politics: I am myself a liberal. By that I mean I believe society exists to nurture and liberate the human spirit, and that largemindedness and openhandedness are the means by which these things are accomplished. I am not ideological. By that I mean I believe opportunities of every kind should be seized upon to advance the well-being of people, especially in assuring them decent wages, free time, privacy, education, and health care, concerns essential to their enfranchisement. (*Death* 258)

This is a politics obviously on the spectrum of liberalism, perhaps closest to a species of communitarianism that the term “civic humanism” describes. The entry in Stanford’s online Encyclopedia of Philosophy says that civic humanism is opposed to “acquisitive individualism” and it’s a stance that says the purpose of society is the “realization of human potentiality, encouraging the flowering of all forms of creativity and ingenuity insofar as they contribute to public welfare.” This corresponds with Robinson’s critique, found throughout her essays, of the self-interestedness of neoliberal economics and her concerns about civic virtue and public responsibility. It also helps explain the most persistent political theme throughout her essays: education. While many criticisms can be brought against her politics, one thing is clear at the outset: these are not the kind of politics a true reactionary conservative like T.S. Eliot would ever endorse. Thus, Robinson’s relation to the past is not characterized by nostalgia. It does not consist of a desire to return to the past, but rather a desire to reimagine past traditions in new ways, essentially to build something new out of old materials.

But there remains the question of motivation, why exactly she opposes the modernist inheritance with such vehemence. One of the stronger reasons concerns gender. While her life largely reflects the quiet solitariness of a scholar, novelist, and teacher, she has in fact lived through a dramatic period in American politics, a time punctuated by foreign wars in Vietnam and Iraq, the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, the feminist and Civil Rights movements, and the end of the Cold War, to name just a few major events. Some of these contexts are indeed of vital importance to understanding her work, and feminism stands out as particularly crucial. Feminist reforms of the university helped make Robinson’s education and subsequent career possible, an outcome which, for a woman of working-class origins like herself, would have been nearly impossible a generation before. However, as I make clear in Chapter One, the feminist reading

of *Housekeeping* has largely fallen out of fashion, and Robinson's later work, with its focus on male experience, make it difficult for the "feminist" label to carry much weight. But perhaps the question of gender can be profitably seen in light of her struggle against modernism. Perhaps it was her status as a woman that allowed her to experience modernism, especially the masculine strain of Eliot and Pound, as oppressive. Perhaps not identifying with it and imagining alternatives to it was experienced by her as liberation. This may be a plausible conjecture. What is at stake here is the question of which cultural movements are most important for understanding her *whole* fictional output. And feminism, in this light, is best understood as possible catalyst behind her resistance to modernism, rather than the ideological purpose of her fiction.

Or, perhaps the experience of modernism as oppressive was an ordinary, widely-shared one amongst aspiring literary artists and intellectuals of Robinson's generation. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson writes that postmodernism emerges "as a specific reaction against the established forms of high modernism" (1961). Robinson's work should be understood as reaction against the high modernism that she first encountered at Brown—just not what Jameson calls a "postmodern" reaction, one that views modernism as "dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new" (1961). She does not want to debunk modernism so much as work back through it, not in order to create something "new"—a modernist idea her work is implicitly skeptical of—but in order to promote suppressed cultural traditions which she believes are more humane. Robinson experienced modernism not only as aesthetically, ethically, politically, and metaphysically problematic, but also an impediment to establishing her own literary and intellectual identity. Perhaps her ultimate motivation for rejecting the modernist inheritance is same reason anyone rejects a

cultural inheritance, because it feels burdensome and the self desires liberation in order to establish its identity.

Whatever our exact interpretation of motivation is, it is clear that Robinson believed there were other ways of thinking, writing, and being from modernism. The nineteenth-century Americans were appealing. Emerson, Dickinson, and Melville offered a grander vision of humanity and the universe. So too did the cosmic scope of her childhood's Presbyterianism. She had an epiphany in the library one day, what she would later call her "escape":

When I was a sophomore in college, taking a course in American philosophy, I went to the library and read an assigned text, Jonathan Edwards's *Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*. There is a long footnote in this daunting treatise that discusses the light of the moon, and how the apparent continuity of the moon's light is a consequence of its reflecting light that is in fact continuously renewed. This was Edwards's analogy for the continuous renewal of the world by the will of God, which creates, to our eyes, seeming lawfulness and identity, but which is in fact a continuous free act of God...Edwards's footnote was my first, best introduction to epistemology and ontology, and my escape—and what a rescue it was—from the contending, tedious determinisms that seem to be all that was on offer to me then. ("Credo" 27)

The liberation she experienced through Edwards set her on a journey away from the "tedious determinisms" of the modernist university and toward something quite different: an artistic vision she would call a "democratic esthetic" and an intellectual vision she would refer to as a "religious belief in intellectual openness" ("Credo" 27). Whether this narrative of epiphany and conversion is plausible or not, it does suggest a framework for understanding the motivation behind her rejection of modernism. She wanted to clear a space for freedom and the creation of

a distinct literary identity. She would use her freedom to form an identity out of a lifelong dialogue with American Romanticism and Protestantism, which always leads back to the Renaissance humanism of her Shakespeare scholarship and her midlife Calvinist enthusiasms.

Still, the idea of Robinson as a kind of “anti-modernist” is hardly satisfying. That she seeks to displace modernism seems like the best possible interpretation of her ambitions. But such a label as “anti-modernist” doesn’t fully encapsulate all of the other identity markers in play, all the other ways Robinson might be fruitfully thought about, as humanist, feminist, scholar, pagan, journalist, Romantic, American, public intellectual, novelist, Iowa Writers’ Workshop instructor, Calvinist, liberal, liberal Protestant, realist, mystic, environmentalist, regionalist, or conservative. This study is not intended to be comprehensive in the sense of showing how each of these labels both applies to and limits her work. The Chapters set out to establish the central meanings, themes, sources, and contexts for *Housekeeping*, *Gilead*, and *Home*. Taken together, they are an account of how a literary imagination developed in strange and unexpected ways over the course of thirty years. But not everything can be said, and there are many moments when certain interpretative paths are merely pointed toward and not taken. The purpose here is to suggest the complexity of this fascinating writer, and to offer future scholars of Robinson a useful study to ponder and correct.

Chapter One

The Romance: *Housekeeping*

Whether *Housekeeping* began as a distraction from Robinson's dissertation on Shakespeare or whether it was an attempt to prove she could write in a more imaginative fashion than the academy permits, what we do know of its origins is that it began with a dream and a stack of scrap paper. As already mentioned in the Introduction, the story goes that Robinson had developed a private habit of writing down metaphors on scraps of paper "just to get the feeling of writing in that voice," the voice, presumably, that would become Ruth's (Fay 198). One day while dozing in the library she had a dream of a catastrophic train accident, which she transcribed into prose and was proud enough of to show to her dissertation supervisor who thought it quite good. She would take the train accident piece and the metaphors with her to France, where she taught for a year at the Université de Haute Bretagne in Rennes. Perhaps it was her experience as an expatriate, its particular quality of loneliness, its distance, linguistically and geographically, from the American West, which inspired her to construct something larger from her fictional scraps. For within a year she had a draft of the manuscript that would be *Housekeeping*, an extraordinarily successful first novel, which remains her most frequently read, written about, and assigned, the winner of PEN/Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for Best First Novel, the Rosenthal Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize.

Although the biographical details are scant and the exact nature of the textual genealogy is undoubtedly far more complex than the sketch above, there is enough information to make an informed argument as to Robinson's primary intentions for writing *Housekeeping*. These fall into three overlapping categories. The first is that *Housekeeping* is a novel of spiritual

development, one deeply informed by religious traditions that ultimately stem from Robinson's Presbyterian upbringing and her penchant for mysticism. The second is that *Housekeeping* appropriates and refashions the tropes, style, and ethos of American Romanticism, primarily Melville, Dickinson, Thoreau, and Emerson, an intention that comes out of Robinson's fascination with this literature and her identification with New England after her years at Pembroke College. The third is that the book is a representation of the American West rooted in Robinson's desire to conjure the enchanted and painful space of her childhood and to fashion a new, female-centered imagination of the West. Thus, *Housekeeping* combines three strong cords of Robinson's biography: being a woman in the Far West, a young adulthood and literary sensibility shaped by New England, and an unshakable religious intensity. Its originality and value lies in Robinson's ability to channel and project this idiosyncratic background into a linguistically complex and psychologically compelling narrative.

Portrait of an Ascetic as a Young Woman

The most important statement by Robinson concerning the moral drama of *Housekeeping* comes in her conversation with Thomas Schaub. When asked whether she had read the reviews of her book which seemed to lack some patience with Ruth's sentiment that "it is better to have nothing," Robinson replies that

"[Ruth is] speaking from an old, old tradition, of an attempt to establish an equilibrium, or to establish a sort of freedom through renunciation of the world, in effect. It's what every prophet in the Bible does. It's the monastic tradition. If you want to go outside this culture, it's what Buddhist monks do. She's not inventing anything" (Schaub 243).

She then goes on to defend Ruth's choice of renunciation:

I think it's incredibly pedestrian to imagine that [Ruth's] impulses or her reflections have to be constrained within ideas of well-being that are offered to us by conventions when they're not taken away. On the one hand, you're supposed to aspire to well-being, etcetera; at the same time, you're supposed to be contemptuous of such things; on the one hand they're considered to be proof that you have competed successfully in the world, and on the other hand they are sneered at as materialism and middle-class complacency.

All of this stuff is nonsense. (243)

The quote is significant for how it frames Ruth's character within the tradition of religious asceticism, whether Western, in the case of the Hebrew prophets, or Eastern, the Buddhist monks. Freedom made through the "renunciation of the world" is ultimately Ruth's desire. She wants to possess nothing, to live outside the realm of property and law, a desire only slowly realized through the novel's mire of tragic circumstance. Robinson's ardent defense of Ruth's asceticism speaks to contemporary culture's anxiety about such desire, since it falls outside the norms of the middle-class aspiration for material well-being and outside a stance of ironic contempt for the middle-class usually associated with the wealthy and bohemians. Ruth attempts to transcend these positions, to establish an ethics, a way of life, beyond the logic of conventionally-defined "well being." Ruth's coming-of-age narrative is a portrait of an ascetic as a young woman.

This particular emphasis on Ruth's spiritual development is often missed by scholars who treat *Housekeeping* as a *bildungsroman*. The best and most frequently cited of these scholars is Martha Ravits, whose article "Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*" established the standard for interpretation along these lines. Her thesis is the following:

In forging a bildungsroman about a female protagonist, Robinson brings a new perspective to bear on the dominant American myth about the developing individual freed from social constraints. Her female adventurer emphasizes the motivations and imperatives of the classic quest and offers fresh testimony about the implications of its outcome—a survival strategy often taken for granted. Repudiation of the domestic sphere by her female quester enlarges the central tradition to include women but leaves them still at the crossroads in a materialistic, patriarchal society. (644)

This is a great insight, for clearly Robinson wanted to revise the American myth of freedom from social constraints by symbolically opening it to women. (In the section below on the West, I take up this and other variations on this thesis and situate them within the context of place.) The problem with Ravits' article is her interpretation of *how* Ruth develops, and for this she ignores Ruth's burgeoning asceticism and turns exclusively toward female-female bonding. She writes:

The orphaned Ruth in *Housekeeping* is, therefore, universally emblematic as a grieving child who carries the image of the lost mother and the unresolved past into all phases of her mental and emotional life. Her quest and choice is always for the missing mother. She can attain full selfhood only by squarely facing the sorrow of maternal abandonment that brings in its wake attendant fears about the wider world of indifferent nature. Ruth as bereaved quester asserts the primacy of the relation to the mother as none of the male orphans so prevalent in American literary history before her have done. Ishmael, Huck Finn, Isaac McCaslin undertook the struggle for maturity by choosing surrogate fathers. Ruth's quest focuses long overdue attention on the individual's resolution of feelings about the bond to the mother as the primary, requisite step in the ascension to selfhood. For the maturing female hero, it is the mother—missing, absent, but always present to the

child's imagination—who is the key to reality, in Whitman's term, "the clef of the universes." (648-649)

Ravits is right to insist on the primacy of the mother-daughter bond, and on Ruth's overwhelming desire to find a surrogate mother. She is also right in finding Sylvie's entrance into selfhood paradoxically defined as a disappearance from society. Ruth's desire for a mother is present from the very beginning. After announcing her name, Ruth delves into the past, telling the story of her family and how they first arrived in Fingerbone:

I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother's house, built for her by her husband, Edmund

Foster, an employee of the railroad, who escaped this world years before I entered it. (3)

For Ruth the past is a story of successive catastrophes, deaths, abandonments, and escapes. And as we find out later, this brief genealogy—a rhetorical trope taken from the Bible—is incomplete, for it omits the most painful event of Ruth's life: the suicide of her mother, Helen. The absence of Helen from this list makes good psychological sense, since it becomes clear that Ruth is traumatized by this loss, making it too painful to be spoken. Readers of *Housekeeping* quickly learn to find the presence of Helen's absence on every page of Ruth's narration. Indeed, Ruth's character, her language, her traumatized psychology, her perception of landscape, is impossible to understand apart from the loss of Helen. Ruth is mother-haunted, desiring Helen's return and everything she represents: security, comfort, stability, love, home. If Helen's return is impossible, then what Ruth needs above all is a surrogate mother, the role Mrs. Sylvia Fisher will eventually fulfill. The centrality of mother-daughter relations is among *Housekeeping's*

most radical departures from conventional coming-of-age narratives, and it is worth mentioning that there is never a sense in *Housekeeping* that men are capable of furnishing the love that Ruth lacks. The loss of and desire for maternal love is the privileged moral experience in *Housekeeping*. And Robinson explores this experience paradoxically, through its textual absence and emotional presence.

But while Ravits charts the narrative's slow movement toward intimacy between Ruth and her new mother Sylvie—a movement she will again chart between Glory and Jack in *Home*—she ignores Ruth's process of worldly renunciation and how it is that Sylvie acts as a teacher in the privations of ascetic life. What Ravits, in reference to Ruth and Sylvie's abandonment of the house, calls “stoic thrift” is actually a far more radical renunciation, one with metaphysical resonances (664).

Ravits joins the many readers of *Housekeeping* who have seen it as a non-religious or even anti-religious text. The critic William Deresiewicz writes, “The metaphysics at work in *Housekeeping* does indeed resemble a form of paganism—a gloomy, Northern paganism. Divinity is immanent in nature but perfectly indifferent to human fate. Life is but a shadow on the surface of the past, and when we die we don't go up to a jubilant heaven but down to the dark to join ‘the dance of bones’” (“Homing Patterns”). But several scholars who have focused on the book's debt to mysticism have complicated this perception by attending to its religious aspects. For example, William Burke argues:

The novel might be fruitfully understood as an unconventional primer on the mystical life, in which the basic accomplishment for both the protagonist, Ruth, and the reader is the expansion of consciousness through a process of border crossings—social, geographic, and perceptual. These crossings, in turn, are developed through the novel's

central metaphor of transience. Transience implies pilgrimage, and the rigors and self-denials of the transient life are necessary spiritual conditioning for the valued crossing from the experience of a world of loss and fragmentation to the perception of a world that is whole and complete. (717)

Burke's religious language of "pilgrimage," "self-denials," "spiritual conditioning," and "mystical life," are fully appropriate, but they are wholly missing from the entire Ravits lineage of scholarship. Sonia Gernes has further enhanced Burke's insights. She writes:

In *Housekeeping*, spirituality remains tied to traditional religion throughout, in method if not in doctrine. Robinson uses the rituals and trappings of the Christian conversion experience, but inverts them for peculiarly feminist aims. She plays with traditional baptism/rebirth symbols of initiation as her characters break with the patriarchal order and create a new community. Robinson also goes further. As the novel progresses, her characters enter a world of transience and flux that merges with the mystical, and in doing so they pass through the stages of purification, contemplation and mystical union that traditional ascetical theologians such as Evelyn Underhill have cited in describing the mystical experience. (114)

The stages of purification, contemplation, and mystical union neatly map onto Ruth's progress, and the persuasiveness of Burke and Gernes religious framework for *Housekeeping* chime well with Robinson's own comments about Ruth's renunciation of the world. This does not mean that Ravits' interpretation is null. Rather, combining her important strain of scholarship with the relatively minor strain on mysticism offers a more fully realized portrait of the trajectory of Ruth's development, one which is closer to Robinson's stated intentions for the novel.

Naming her character “Ruth” sets off religious associations right away. *Housekeeping* begins meekly—“My name is Ruth”—a first sentence whose tone belies a forceful, allusive literary gesture. It establishes the Biblical book of Ruth as a narrative, symbolic, and characterological template. The name has important associations for Robinson: “I know that simply making the choice of the narrator's name was important—which was a thing that I did very early—having to do with pity and grief and compassion and also vulnerability. I mean, again, feeding from the Book of Ruth itself rather than just the meaning of the name” (Hedrick 1). This density of allusion is typical of *Housekeeping*. It is a way of marking itself as literary, as literature. Its seemingly simplistic sentences prove, upon closer examination, to flower into a multiplicity of meaning and allusion. And as the novel goes on, deep, almost imperceptible connections are formed between allusions, meanings, and metaphors. Robinson’s ambition is felt in this first sentence, as she self-consciously constructs a dense, complicated literary artifact, seeking to insert herself the literary tradition which matters most to her: Biblical narrative.

The Bible’s Book of Ruth is among the primary sources for the book’s themes and plot. It is one of the few books of the Bible that centers on female experience. While the Biblical book does not overturn existing patriarchal cultural norms, it does feature a marriage plot between Ruth and Boaz, which mirrors Ruth’s redemption through a radical choice of female-female companionship. According to the Oxford Classics King James’ Bible, in the Book of Ruth “All the social and sexual relations which tie women to men are here reinforced. Though it may be an idyllic romance in the reception history of the Bible, in its few pages...it reinforces all the economic and ideological facts involved in biblical marriages: kin obligations, customary duties, the rules of land exchanges and dominant male status” (340). It is remarkable just how marginal marriage is to *Housekeeping*—even in places where Robinson could narrate a wedding,

she chooses not to, just as she chooses not to narrate other formal ceremonies like funerals, lending the novel a sense of existing outside the rituals and trappings of civilization. Perhaps *The Book of Ruth* also appealed to Robinson for its absence of any specific mention of God. It is a remarkably “secular” book in its omission of the YHWH cult, so the book’s humanism and implicit evocation of the sacred must have been attractive to Robinson.

Housekeeping also mirrors the Book of Ruth with respect to narrative structure. Upon first reading the manuscript of *Housekeeping*, publishers wanted Robinson to call it *The Book of Ruth*, a title which would have alluded not only to the Biblical source but also to the idea that the novel is mediated by Ruth’s consciousness; however, this “didn’t seem appropriate” (Hedrick 2) to Robinson. In any case, for Robinson the problem posed by the Book of Ruth is “who to follow”: “And the decision that Ruth makes is, ‘Where thou goest I shall go; thy people shall be my people and thy God, my God.’ It seems to me that in a certain way the Ruth in my book makes that kind of radical choice about whose terms of reality will she accept. When she follows Sylvie, she’s passing from one civilization to another” (Hedrick 2). The Book allows Ruth, the stranger, who is not an Israelite, to play a part in the Davidic lineage. *Housekeeping* picks up the Book of Ruth’s theme of not injustice or villainy but great misfortune, famine and filial loss. The Bible serves as a plot template and source for symbols and imagery, and Robinson’s focus on female characters within the Bible represents the originality of her appropriation, not Adam, Moses, or Jesus, but Ruth and Naomi, Noah’s wife, and Eve. Robinson may also have been attracted to the scenes of rural life in Ruth, the images of fields and gleaning, which is why the book is often categorized as an “idyll,” a term equally applicable to *Housekeeping*.

The better part of the novel takes place when Ruth is an adolescent, but there is one image taken from Ruth's memory of herself as a young child, an image which points to her ascetic future:

I remember sitting under the ironing board, which pulled down from the kitchen wall, while she ironed the parlor curtains and muttered "Robin Adair." One veil after another fell down around me, starched and white and fragrant, and I had vague dreams of being hidden or cloistered, and watched the electric cord wag, and contemplated my grandmother's big black shoes, and her legs in their orangy-brown stockings, as contourless, as completely unshaped by muscle as two thick bones. Even then she was old. (26-27)

Ruth does not remember a time of maternal affection, of touch or loving gaze, but a moment of "being hidden or cloistered." Importantly, Ruth's silent withdrawal, perhaps her defining character trait, carries the spiritual overtones of asceticism implied by the word "cloistered." So Ruth's monastic inclination is there from the beginning of her life, though it is clear that the desire for silent retreat arises out of a particular life circumstance, her experience of loss and inconstant maternal affection. It is therefore apt that the first suggestion of Ruth's asceticism comes at the awareness of her grandmother's corporeal frailty.

Ruth's grandmother never "dies." She "eschewed awakening," a linguistic evasion necessary to save Ruth from the pain of recollection (29). Sylvia's sisters-in-law, Lily and Nona, were "fetched from Spokane and took up housekeeping in Fingerbone" (29). The question prompted by their arrival is whether this pair will provide Ruth and Lucille with some stability of care after the losses of mother and grandmother. This prospect quickly appears dubious. Lily and Nona are not familiar with caring for children, evidenced by their "unpracticed pats and

kisses” (29). They cope with the change of new surrounding by emitting a kind of nervous energy between them. Habit is their god: “It seemed then and always to be the elaboration and ornamentation of the consensus between them, which was as intricate and well-tended as a termite castle” (30). The image of the termite castle, with its paradoxical scale of large and small, and its suggestion of the interminable business of insectile architecture, perfectly embodies the anxious, objectively-tiny-subjectivity-enormous world of Lily and Nona. Their dialogue mulls from one worry to the next, and Robinson’s omission of the speaker’s name from the speech suggests the pair is indistinguishable, void of individuality, an idea reinforced by the mirrored syllable count and sound of their names. The fact that Lily and Nona are rendered comic by their exaggerated fretting—they are *Housekeeping*’s Tweedledum and Tweedledee—and therefore unworthy of esteem from Ruth and the reader says something about the novel’s values. Even though Lily and Nona have evaded such traditional bourgeois norms as marriage and motherhood, they have embraced the value of conformity, sacrificing their individuality to the group, perhaps the foremost sin in the minds of Robinson and her romantic forebears, Emerson, Dickinson, and Whitman. Lily and Nona are punished accordingly insofar as they appear comically absurd and subjectively null.

Repetition is what makes Lily and Nona thrive. But in the ever-changing world of Fingerbone, habit is insufficient. Ruth says, “Lily and Nona, I think, enjoyed nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day in the next. This was not to be achieved in Fingerbone, where any acquaintance was perforce new and therefore more objectionable than solitude, and where Lucille and I perpetually threatened to cough or outgrow our shoes” (32). Ruth sees the limitations of the spiritual option represented by Lily and Nona. It is a means of walling off the self from otherness, as illusory as the solidity of roofs. Ruth reports that “some

houses in Fingerbone simply fell from the weight of snow on their roofs,” a phenomena which is a “perpetual anxiety to my great-aunts” (33). So if habit cannot inure the self from otherness, with the result that the self is anxious and cannot accommodate change, there must be other more enlightened means to reconcile the realities of darkness, snow, and change. As the days pass, Ruth and Lucille take their first narrated journey out of the house, spending time by the frozen lake, never mentioning their mother, but wanting to be near the site of her loss, taking up their roles as town outcasts, throwing snowballs at stray dogs. And as the winter grows harsher, Lily and Nona become more anxious and so they begin to formulate a plan of escape. “Sylvie,” they decide, “must come” (43).

Besides Ruth, Sylvie is the major character of the book. Her name partakes of nature, *sylvan*, Latin for forest, a resonance echoed in her attire, her “deep green” dress and her brooch with “a bunch of lilies of the valley” (45). The lilies are symbolic of Sylvie’s role as savior, reinforced by her last name “Fisher,” whose task is to rescue the girls from another source of inadequate parental support, and ultimately to provide a source of love and community for Ruth. Sylvie is the quintessential “outsider,” unencumbered and unaware of the constraints of Fingerbone society, which she had long since forgone. This status, as savior, as outsider, is reflected in her appearance. When she arrives Ruth notices “her hair was wet, her hands were red and withered from the cold, her feet were bare except for loafers. Her raincoat was so shapeless and oversized that she must have found it on a bench” (45). She resembles a transient: the space of the “bench” contributes to this association, of one un-housed and unprepared for the realities of winter. While her appearance is initially shocking, particularly to Lily and Nona, the book will with time affirm Sylvie’s unpreparedness. The transient associations of the bench, the cold hands, and the shapeless raincoat are evidence of a spiritual modality that is able to

accommodate otherness and change. Unlike Lily and Nona, Sylvie has learned to live apart from the obsessive need of warmth, clothing, shelter, and food. She is a keen practitioner in the ascetic arts of renunciation. Sylvie's placing of hands on Ruth and Lucille is a christening of sorts, a ritual welcoming of the girls into the church of Sylvie. Her sacred character is solidified when Ruth refers to her as having the "placid modesty of a virgin who has conceived" (49).

It is only after Sylvie arrives that Ruth begins her mystical apprenticeship. Sylvie proves the opposite of Lily and Nona right away, and begins to model the privations necessary for Ruth to achieve her freedom. Instead of staying indoors, Sylvie is off on a walkabout town, signaling her openness to experience and disregard for domestic habits and conventions. This makes Lucille and Ruth anxious, since her leave-taking is seen as the first step toward a permanent absence. But Sylvie is not leaving Fingerbone. She is found throwing ice at stray dogs, a behavior which aligns her with the girls' treatment of the dogs in the previous chapter. Lucille's concern with material comfort is already apparent in her minor opposition toward Sylvie. It takes the form of concern for Sylvie's cold hands, saying there is "hand lotion at home" (57). This small gesture associates Lucille with a set of values, which include comfort, propriety, grooming, materialism, beauty and its related commercial products. These are the values implicit in the "hand lotion" and will find their spatial equivalent later in the novel in the "drug store." Ruth's silence serves as a tacit affirmation of Sylvie's disregard for Lucille's conventionally middle-class values. The end of Chapter 3 sounds the theme of education, as Sylvie informs Lucille that the periodic table's symbol Fe stands for iron. This is the beginning of Lucille's formal education in mastering and decoding cultural codes, a variety of education for which Ruth will show little interest or aptitude. Lily and Nona leave for Spokane and the last

phrase—“we and the house were Sylvie’s”—signals the beginning of Sylvie’s rule, whose legitimacy will be challenged from both within and without the house (59).

If Sylvie’s stay is another beginning, another genesis, then it should be no surprise that we should find a flood arriving soon thereafter. Robinson makes the connection between *Housekeeping*’s flood and Noah’s explicit. “So at the end of three days the houses and hutches and barns and sheds of Fingerbone were like so many spilled and foundered arks” (61). Ruth calls the flood a “disaster,” but perhaps it is also a “theodicy.” In *Absence of Mind* Robinson says this about the ancient flood narratives:

The Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian flood stories are theodicies, certainly among the earliest examples of this interesting genre. Why does catastrophe occur? What does it mean? The nature of the gods and their expectations of and feelings toward human beings are explored in these narratives. (25)

The flood of Fingerbone is used for precisely these purposes, an opportunity for Ruth to experience and make meaning of catastrophe. The presence of the flood, and its constant threat to the town of Fingerbone, force Ruth to confront the question of permanence-versus-impermanence and whether the desire to preserve even something as fundamental as a home or a city is a desire worth pursuing. If everything physical is subject to flooding, isn’t it better to assume a way of life that accepts this reality? The problem is not that time produces chaos, since, like the seasons, time in *Housekeeping* has order: the disorder of death necessarily circles toward a new order of things, the reassertion of “the dear ordinary.” The problem for Ruth is framed as a spiritual problem: Given the reality of transience, how should one live? What kind of self should one cultivate? This is the ancient question which Ruth must discover and seek to answer. It is a question, *contra* those critics who see little religion in *Housekeeping*, which is

essentially religious, by which I mean that all major religious traditions articulate a position regarding time and history, as something to transcend (varieties of Buddhism and Platonism), affirm (varieties of Judaism, Christianity), stoically grin and bear (Stoicism, Naturalism), or more mystical positions in-between. And it is the question implicit in Ruth's imagination of the fluctuating world inhabited by her mother, aunts, and grandmother. Surely the memory of the flood, with its capacity for sudden catastrophe, informs and helps solidify Ruth's ascetic desire.

The flood is also a first step to making meaning of her mother's absence. Helen, of course, is strongly identified with the lake, and so with the element of water. Read in this symbolic light, the flood is a visitation by Helen, an absence whose presence has the power to overrun any boundaries: the "water poured over the thresholds and covered the floor to the depth of four inches" (61). The house in Fingerbone is built atop a hill, so the flood waters do not pose any mortal danger to the girls. They are secure in their roles as observers, giving Ruth the opportunity to put language to perception:

That flood flattened scores of headstones. More disturbing, the graves sank when the water receded, so that they looked a little like hollow sides or empty belies. And then the library was flooded to a depth of three shelves, creating vast gaps in the Dewey decimal system. The losses in hooked and braided rugs and needlepoint footstools will never be reckoned. Fungus and mold crept into wedding dresses and photograph albums, so that the leather crumbled in our hands when we lifted the covers, and the sharp smell that rose when we opened them was as insinuating as the smells one finds under a plant or a rock.
(62-63)

Ruth submits a poetry of ruination, strongly echoing the decaying domestic spaces of Dickinson. It is a catalog of material loss, of human mastery of systems like the Dewey decimal and the

complicated weavings of needlepoint meeting their liquid end. It also suggests the ultimate fate of spiritual realities, the death of marriage in the dress and memory in photographs. The omission of the human body from this list makes its fragile materiality more strongly felt, and we are to assume that the imagination of the body is simply too painful for Ruth to express directly, though it is suggested everywhere. Perhaps the most curious thing about this passage is its tone. What is Ruth's attitude toward this devastation? The tone never approaches elegy. It is content with an icier music, a tone of stunned testimony, of a person able to perceive and report but not to feel.

Sylvie's attitude toward the flood is one of acceptance, so the girls stay indoors and play crazy eights upstairs, while the lower floor is entirely flooded. The flooded house confronts Ruth with an intense experience of otherness. The house is so absolutely dark that Ruth finds herself "reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that" (70). Sylvie supplies the apocalyptic note: "It's like the end of the world!" (70). This is yet another step in Ruth's spiritual progress: acclimating to the dark and the cold, to silence and being unaccompanied. It is difficult for Ruth to understand Sylvie's behavior, how she seems absent: "She stood still as an effigy" (72). Sylvie's response is to adapt to the change, to stay in the flooded house, to play crazy eights and cook dinner as if the water weren't anything unusual. Lucille wants to "find some other people" (66). She begins her turn toward society, while Ruth begins her turn toward Sylvie. Eventually the flood recedes, the town is restored—"an exemplary community effort in which we had no part"—and the girls go back to school (76).

Perhaps the most central social institution to *Housekeeping* is the school, which makes sense given the novel's play on the novel of education. Ruth can barely stand it. "My cold, visceral dread of school I had learned to ignore. It was a discomfort that was not to be relieved,

like an itch in an amputated limb” (77). This tension between the individual and the institutional demands of formal education is familiar to readers of American literature, going back at least as far as Huck Finn’s uncomfortable “sivilizing.” Robinson gives this old drama a darker, Edgar-Allen-Poe-like edge in the image of the itchy amputated limb. (The itch “in” the limb rather than “on” the skin of the limb and the ambiguity of which limb—leg or arm?—gives the metaphor a particularly harrowing effect.) The line comes directly after an allusion to Emily Dickinson’s “I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died” and seems to be channeling that poem’s domestic darkness. Staying with this metaphor, we might ask how then can Ruth relieve her discomfort and, so to speak, scratch the limb? If the amputated limb is, at least in part, a metaphor for Ruth’s drowned mother, then it is clear that any “itching” that is desired will not happen within the confines of the school, but must be sought nearer the site of loss, specifically at the lake. The idea of a liberal transformation—a liberation through education, through reading is explicitly rejected. Ruth’s transfiguration is not primarily the result of reading books but rather of a much more mysteriously charted inward change, what might as well be called a religious experience.

The image of two lonely truant girls choosing the lakeside over the school is a fresh feminist revision of a familiar trope, the rustic boy who prefers fishing to the classroom. Robinson, though, does not give Ruth or Lucille any specific activity to do. Their banishment from the school—“we were cruelly banished from a place where we had no desire to be”—releases them into the severities of nature, the privileged space of spiritual testing and awakening. “The combined effects of cold, tedium, guilt, loneliness, and dread” have the paradoxical effect of “sharpen[ing] our senses wonderfully” (79). This is typical of *Housekeeping*’s celebration of paradox. By suffering body and soul, the senses are sharpened. Deprivation produces enlargement. By moving deeper into darkness, light will be found. By

reducing the self, the self is enlarged. Absence is the fullest presence. As one scholar puts it, “For Plato it is the eye that learns to see in the light; for Robinson it is the darkening of the eye that enlarges perception” (Burke 722). This affection for paradox may ultimately have its source in Robinson’s childhood Presbyterianism, where she would have encountered on Sunday mornings the many paradoxes of Christian theology, stories of the God-Man who gives life through death.

The precariousness of the girls’ situation is reinforced when they spy Sylvie take a walk out onto the middle of the bridge over the lake. Ruth’s reports numbly that “the wind was strong enough to press her coat against her side and legs, and to flutter her hair” (81). The girls do not try to intervene; they simply watch. Although the stage appears to set for Sylvie’s suicide—what else could Ruth think given the spatial parallel to the high-to-low trajectory of her mother’s apparent suicide?—Sylvie sees the girls and they walk home together. Ruth is silent; Lucille has questions. But they both agree that “our aunt was not a stable person” (82). Stability is exactly what she lacks, for Sylvie is the embodiment of transience, a characteristic which, at first, provokes anxiety in both girls. Particularly irksome for them is that Sylvie cannot be stably located in space. “We thought we sometimes heard her leave the house, and once when we got out of bed, we found her playing solitaire in the kitchen, and once we found her sitting on the back porch steps, and once we found her standing in the orchard” (83). What Ruth and Lucille want is the stable, loving presence of a mother. What they have instead is the flickering, ghost-like, aloofness of Sylvie. Eventually this anxiety dissipates under the power of habit. “Days and weeks passed the same way, and finally we began to think of other things” (84).

Chapter 5 ends on a note of separation. Ruth is “content with Sylvie” (92). Lucille has turned away from Sylvie and now faces the community with a “calm, horizontal look of settled

purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore” (92). The change is rooted in the girls’ opposing attitude toward time, which Robinson captures in their attitudes toward clothing. Ruth accepts Sylvie’s “taste for the fanciful”: sequined velveteen ballet slippers which allow for the seep of water and mud. She accepts the inevitable decay of physical things. Lucille is the opposite. She “wanted worsted mittens, brown oxfords, red rubber boots” (93). The adjectives convey the stability and solidity that Lucille desires. She wants clothing that curbs or at least delays natural processes of decay, that keep her safe, secure, warm, and comfortable. These differing attitudes toward clothing, the difference between the desire for the aesthetically-pleasing fanciful and the utilitarian durable, figures how the three main characters dwell in different registers of time. As Ruth begins to move out of the traumas of the past, Lucille begins to project into the future—“Time that had not come yet—an anomaly in itself—had the fiercest reality for her” (93)—while Sylvie “inhabited a millennial present,” fully accepting of the “deteriorations of things” (94).

Lucille and Ruth continue to avoid school, aided by Sylvie’s fraudulent letters of excuse. Robinson makes Sylvie so oblivious to traditional standards of parental care—for example, she ought to see to the proper education of the children in her charge—that we have no room to judge her. Sylvie exists outside of traditional maternal norms, and perhaps in her excuse-note writing there is something positive, a belief that education takes place not in the classroom but, as Thoreau insisted, in the woods. After all, the woods are where the girls spend their time, though they go for different reasons. “I went to the woods for the woods’ own sake, while, increasingly, Lucille seemed to be enduring a banishment there” (97-99). The relationship between Ruth and Lucille comes under considerable strain at this point. Indeed the pronoun “we,” which up to this point Ruth felt comfortable using to stand for herself and Lucille,

becomes nearly useless, as the minds and desires of the sisters separate. “We—in recollection I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness even through the course of that summer, though often enough she was restless and morose” (98).

Other signs of their difference appear. Their sexual maturity is progressing at an uneven rate. Lucille’s “tiny, child-nippled breasts filled her with shame and me with alarm” (97). Lucille’s body expresses her readiness to leave the isolation of Sylvie’s household, to engage with the world of society and sex. But “while [Lucille] became a small woman, I became a towering child” (97). Ruth’s perpetual childlikeness readies her for her fate as a celibate ascetic, for eventually neither Ruth nor Sylvie will have anything to do with sex or society. Sex, whether the sex act itself or sexual desire in general, is a notable absence across Robinson’s work. In general, she seems more comfortable writing characters who are either too old for sex (Ames and old Boughton), too young (Ruth), or totally uninterested in the erotic (Sylvie). Of course, an important exception is Jack Boughton, for whom sex is the cause of his fall. Perhaps Robinson’s preference for old men and celibates is simply another mark of her non-conformity, an unwillingness to cater to a contemporary culture inundated with sexual imagery. Or perhaps it is a response to Freud and Darwin, so often the targets of her essays, as if to say not everything in life can be reduced to *eros* or the biological need to procreate. What is clear is that Ruth’s coming-of-age has nothing to do with sex—it is, in fact, an education of love without sex—while Lucille’s does and is undertaken almost entirely outside of narrative space.

Lucille makes friends with Rosette Browne, a socially respectable girl from a respectable family, “through whose eyes she continually imagined she saw” (103). The introduction of Rosette Browne, whom Ruth only hears about and does not see, is the novel’s first significant link to society. And with the introduction of society comes judgment. Ruth describes them as

“those demure but absolute arbiters who continually sat in judgment of our lives,” and then she spins the metaphor of judgment into an imaginary trial scene wherein Lucille “tried to approach our judges as an intercessor” (104). Needless to say, *Housekeeping* vis-à-vis Ruth offers a radically negative view of society’s irrational and almost violent demands on the individual, as absolute as anything found in Emerson or Thoreau’s professions of non-conformity.

One day the sisters find Sylvie sleeping on a bench with a newspaper over her face. Lucille, fully acclimated to viewing reality through the prism of society’s judgment, is ashamed and runs away. Ruth, unembarrassed, stays with Sylvie, and the result is a new experience of her identity:

I often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent, in fact. It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares. But my allusion to this feeling of ghostliness sounded peculiar, and sweat started all over my body, convicting me on the spot of gross corporeality (106).

With this realization Robinson is once again exploring the dynamics of presence and absence, mind and body. Ruth feels her body only in the company of Sylvie who may or may not have found the sound of Ruth’s admitted ghostliness “peculiar.” Ruth feels herself to have a spectral presence in the world, but no one has a more powerful presence for the reader as Ruth, whose voice *is* the novel. The first-time reader of *Housekeeping* might see Ruth’s desire then to be the achievement of existence in the world, of firm bodily presence. But this would be a mistake, since Robinson is emphatic in making the mystical point that absence can achieve more presence than presence itself. Such is the case of Helen’s absence who makes her presence felt on every page. It is also the case of Ruth whose disappearance at the end of the novel causes her to grow

in presence for the town, for Lucille, and finally the reader. By this mystical logic, existence means disappearance.

Ruth and Lucille take one last journey together into the woods. This extraordinary passage combines the picaresque with naturalistic description. It also has a political resonance. In having two young girls march out into the wilderness to fish and hike and camp, Robinson is again opening up new terrain for women, freeing them from the domestic and the societal and allowing them to take part in a kind of adventure narrative traditionally reserved for men. Although the girls do not intend to spend the night in the woods, they realize that it is too late to turn around and decide to set up a crude shelter beside the lake shore. Lucille is frightened by the dark; as her name suggests, she is a character desirous of *luce* or light. Ruth settles in for another transformation experience, one which brings her deeper into the cold, the dark, the other: “I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked...” (116).

Ruth says, “It seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent” (116). This is the ambiguous result of Ruth’s encounter with darkness. Does she desire the “perfect and permanent” darkness, which sounds so much like death? Was the experience with darkness rapturous, frightening, sublime, or some other emotional combination? What should the reader’s attitude be toward this condition of mindlessness—a moment without memory or thought or the need for “relics, remnant”? Is it something to be viewed positively, even though it seems to be the annihilation of consciousness and social relations? Such question-begging seems to be the point, since this is a moment of unnamable mystical

experience, one which language can never fully accommodate. And we are left, like Ruth, in a place of exhilarating uncertainty.

In the morning, Ruth and Lucille make for home and find Sylvie in the kitchen reading a magazine, seemingly unconcerned by the girls' absence. Lucille drags Ruth to the drug store to buy beauty products, but Ruth doesn't want to stay and leaves for home. Afterwards, Lucille begins a pattern of distancing and isolation, until she escapes one night for the Home Economics teacher's house. Miss Royce informally adopts her, leaving Ruth with "no sister after that night" (140). Lucille's flight into conventional life is yet another loss for Ruth, another in the pattern abandonments that began with the grandfather, grandmother, Helen, and Lily and Nona. Miss Royce is a figure of respectable society, the moralistic establishment of Fingerbone, who shows up to collect Lucille's things in her "church clothes" (141). She is another female character whose morality of propriety and respectability Ruth will reject. Finally alone with Sylvie, Ruth has undergone the necessary renunciations that will compel her mystical conversion and rebirth.

The following day, Sylvie and Ruth embark on their journey to the far shore of the lake, a symbolic crossing-over of the space of loss and grief and into an entirely new world. When Sylvie wakes Ruth, she finds herself in a liminal space between sleeping and waking. Even though she follows, she says "I had given up all sensation to the discomforts of cold and haste and hunger, and crouched far inside myself, still sleeping" (144). Ruth is still an apprentice mystic at this point, still cowering from discomfort, a "long-legged insect bracing itself out of its chrysalis" (147). Sylvie, uncaring of the law of private property, "borrows" a boat from the shore, a boat strongly associated with masculinity, for a "burly man in knee boots and black pants and red plaid jacket" yells and throws rocks at the girls as they make their crossing (146). The boat is taken from men for strictly female purposes: for birth, as in the image when Ruth

“crawled under [Sylvie’s] body and out between her legs,” and an image of mother-daughter bonding: “We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child” (145-146). Sylvie’s strong rowing and Ruth’s sleepy passivity comprise a strong analogy to the mother’s work of labor while the fetus awaits the new world. And, like any birth, Ruth’s rebirth will require some work and pain on her part.

They land and dock the boat on the far shore, on a landscape made symbolic by its feminine features. “Out from the cleft or valley the mountains made a spilled a lap of spongy earth, overgrown with brush” (150). An abandoned cabin is there, and Sylvie speaks of rumors of invisible children, and then she leaves Ruth alone: “Sylvie was gone” (153). This is the final stage of Ruth’s mystical education, the last abandonment she suffers before she entirely embraces the renunciation of the world. It is also the most lavishly written of Robinson’s pages, as Ruth develops metaphors of ruin and resurrection from her Latin textbooks, remembering the city of Carthage sown with salt and imagining one day there “rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and tress of rime and brine” (152). Out of this meditation comes her ascetic solution:

For need can blossom into all the compensations it requires. To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? (152)

As Robinson in the Shaub interview said, “Ruth is not inventing anything.” Keats comes to a similar conclusion in “Ode on Melancholy”:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,

Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
 Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
 His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
 And be among her cloudy trophies hung (195).

Perhaps Ruth's teacher, Miss Knoll, was reading this poem, she "who was so obese that she wore laceless sneakers and the tongues popped up, and who wept when she read Keats and was ashamed" (188). The moment also recalls a sentiment in Dickinson, another poet Ruth knows, who in 745 speaks of "Renunciation—a piercing virtue" (365). It is an ascetic logic, a movement into radical dispossession. As Gernes writes, "Having recognized the need for radical dispossession, Ruth embraces it, denying comfort to both the senses and the psyche" (159). This is not, however, a renunciation of desire. Desire remains, becoming the only compensation Ruth needs. "Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smoothes our hair, and brings us wild strawberries" (153). Desire, not possession, supplies the need for maternal intimacy (smoothes our hair) and bodily appetite (wild strawberries). This is why, once back on the boat, Ruth and Sylvie will exchange utterances of desire—"I wish I had a hamburger" and "I wish I had a piece of pie"—without acting upon them, since the two will subsist on desire alone (170). Given the reality of transience, the frailty of the material world, and her circumstance of having been "turned out of house," without one "solid human bond," Ruth concludes that "it is better to have nothing," a stark statement of worldly renunciation. She is prepared to become pure spirit, asking the invisible children to "come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart" (159). It is at this terrifying point of surrender and self-abandonment, the high point of Ruth's mystical education, that her old self dies off and she is reborn with Sylvie.

Sylvie's return is marked by a ritual gesture of union. "She opened her coat and closed it around me, bundling me awkwardly against her so that my cheekbone pillowed on her breastbone" (160). This is an obvious maternal image, reminiscent of the paintings of Madonna with Child, and Robinson also embeds these religious associations into the language of the scene. "I was angry that she had left me for so long, and that she did not ask pardon or explain, and that by abandoning me she had assumed the power to bestow such a richness of grace. For in fact I wore her coat like beatitude, and her arms around me were as heartening as mercy, and I would say nothing that might make her loosen her grasp or take one step away" (161). Of this moment, Ravits writes, "The language of religious redemption formalizes Ruth's conscious acceptance of Sylvie as adoptive mother" (660). However, the religious language does more than "formalize," since their community, founded on ascetic principles, resembles something closer to a religious order of nuns. Gernes is closer to Robinson's intentions when she writes, "Unhoused of her flesh and united bone to bone with Sylvie, Ruth is ready to be invested with the garments of transience, much as a novice in a religious order is invested with a habit which signifies her commitment" (160). Ruth has found a new mother and a new self with Sylvie, and Robinson is not such an unrepentant individualist to exclude the need for community, however small. But Ruth has also embraced a new ethics, a life of dispossession, transcending law, property, sex, and society.

More spiritual training takes place on the boat ride back to Fingerbone. They wait under the bridge for the train, which strains Ruth's tolerance for discomfort and solitude. Then she helps Sylvie row home, a sign of her equality within the community, and she seems to have passed beyond certain binary oppositions, like sleeping and waking. "You can go to sleep if you want to," Sylvie tell her. "It won't make any difference" (171). In the only appearance of

an ethnic other in *Housekeeping*, an “old Indian woman” is used to solidify the relationship, when she refers to Ruth as Sylvie’s child (171). As a symbolic presence of the most politically marginal subject, the Native American woman is the only character who can affirm Ruth and Sylvie’s relationship, as it cannot exist within the bounds of conventional society. Lucille certainly cannot understand it. In fact, Ruth has passed so far beyond Lucille that her words are silent. “It seemed Lucille was talking to me. I think she said that I need not stay with Sylvie. I believe she mentioned my comfort...but I could not hear a word she said” (175).

The remainder of the novel dramatizes the conflict between Ruth and Sylvie’s ascetic community and the conformist demands of society. Rumors spread throughout Fingerbone of Ruth’s journey across the lake and of her riding the railcar home. Well-intentioned church ladies, metaphors for conformist pressure, begin to appear at Sylvie’s house with their “casseroles and coffee cakes. They brought me knitted socks and caps and comforters,” all of these signs of middle-class, materialist well-being, the ethic Ruth and Sylvie have rejected (179). Ruth does not acknowledge them, for she “spoke only to Sylvie” (183). A traditional education in school has become impossible. Ruth “could not appear to pay attention to the teacher for fear she might call on me and I would suddenly be the center of attention,” a great fear as she has already opted for a life of transient invisibility (188). And it eventually becomes clear, after successive visits by church ladies and the sheriff, that the possibility of living a truly transcendent, unconventional life is not possible within society. Ruth allows her bitter experience of loss inform her judgment: “It seemed to me that the fragility of our household was by now so great that the breach was inevitable, and so it was futile to worry whether there was wisdom or sense in any particular scheme to save it. One thing or another would put an end to it soon” (188).

Again, Ruth uses Biblical sources to make meaning out of a painful, vexing situation, lending her struggle against society a religious, metaphysical cast. As Burke writes,

Transience is thus likened to a difficult spiritual path offering the consolations of intuitions, epiphanies, and transcendent experiences. The religious overtones, moreover, extend beyond the confines of Christian or even western religious traditions. The Old Testament analogy of Noah and the Flood is referred to throughout the novel, an ongoing reminder that the physical world is subject to catastrophic changes. Ruth looks to the New Testament for conceptions of restoration, imagining the mission of Jesus as one of retrieving life from death and restoring that which has been lost: "He gave Lazarus back to his mother, and to the centurion he gave his daughter again. He even restored the severed ear of the soldier who came to arrest Him—a fact that allows us to hope the resurrection will reflect a considerable attention to detail." (194)

Ruth continues her spiritual apprenticeship, testing Sylvie in the orchard—an allusion to Gethsemane—by hiding from her and slipping into momentary absence. Ruth learns “an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort. I felt giddily free and eager...I could feel that I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one” (204). This is how Ruth achieves her freedom, by “breaking the tethers of need,” which ultimately include the need for permanent shelter.

The burning of the house, which is often read as a radical feminist gesture, is perhaps best seen as Ruth and Sylvie’s last act of purgation. The fire is purgatorial, then, cleansing away the last need for shelter and the last illusion of permanence, so that they are “cast out to wander” as transients (209). The crossing of the bridge is Ruth and Sylvie’s last narrated act, and scholars

and readers have always asked whether they are alive or dead. The easy way to answer this question is by appealing to the tradition of mysticism. What Ruth and Sylvie have done is passed into a state of oneness, where oppositions like alive/dead, absence/presence, past/present are brought into unity. As Ruth says of another opposition, “I have never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming” (215). It is impossible to locate them firmly on any one side of these oppositions, because they are both. Gernes explains that Ruth is drawn toward “what Underhill describes as absolute sensation: ‘a pure feeling-state in which the fragmentary contacts with Reality achieved through the senses are merged in a wholeness of communion which feels and knows all at once, yet in a way which the reason can never understand ...’ (164). It is a state that can never be understood by language. “All this is fact,” Ruth says, but “fact explains nothing” (217). The narrative ends with a series of positive negations, rhetorically mimicking the breakdown of oppositions. She imagines Lucille “thronged by our absence” without anyone around her knowing “how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie” (219). As the critic Amy Hungerford put it, “reconciliation is the project of *Housekeeping*...the narrative is designed to knit up a broken world into a whole, through simile and analogy, or through the idea that absence produces the present thing through the intensity of longing...the human effort, at great cost, is to bridge the gap, draw difference closer, knit up the world” (243).

Viewing Ruth’s coming-of-age as an ascetic project has implications for Robinson’s biography and the wider perception of her fictional project. It would appear that Robinson’s religious temperament was already in place by the time she wrote *Housekeeping*, though it had yet to take its definitive doctrinal shape. What *Housekeeping* may reflect is Robinson’s childhood surrounded by a Protestant culture, which by her late 20s had transformed into

something self-invented, an undefined mystical spirituality, perhaps closer to pantheism than Christian orthodoxy. Thus, *Housekeeping* is deeply informed by religious traditions without being in any way doctrinally specific. From a religious standpoint, the great change from *Housekeeping* to *Gilead* is the move from the undefined ascetic mysticism of Ruth to the specific Congregationalism of Ames, a change all evidence suggests Robinson experienced herself.

Thinking with New England

If *Housekeeping* borrows from religious traditions for its drama of moral development, it turns to nineteenth-century New England for its representation of consciousness. Like so many novels of the twentieth century, *Housekeeping* emphasizes and dramatizes Ruth's faculties of mind. Most often, Ruth is found thinking, perceiving, speculating, meditating, and interpreting, processing experience to create knowledge and meaning out of language. Ruth's subjectivity is not defined by action but primarily by thought, and it is in this emphasis on consciousness that *Housekeeping's* debt to previous American authors is most profound.

In interviews and essays, Robinson has often spoken of her admiration for nineteenth-century American writing and those authors traditionally grouped under the "American Renaissance" rubric. In her short essay "The Hum Inside the Skull" she writes, "If to admire and to be influenced are more or less the same thing, I must be influenced most deeply by the 19th-century Americans — Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson and Poe" (1). "I happen to have read these old aunts and uncles at an impressionable age, and so I will always answer to them in my mind" (1). While many scholars have traced this line of influence, they have deemphasized the aspect of this writing that Robinson most values, namely their

representation of consciousness. Nearly every time any of these authors is mentioned, Robinson talks about the importance of mind in their work:

Nothing in literature appeals to me more than the rigor with which [Dickinson, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Emerson, Poe] fasten on problems of language, of consciousness — bending form to their purposes, ransacking ordinary speech and common experience, rummaging through the exotic and recondite, setting Promethean doubts to hymn tunes, refining popular magazine tales into arabesques, pondering bean fields, celebrating the float and odor of hair, always, to borrow a phrase from Wallace Stevens, in the act of finding what will suffice. I think they must have believed everything can be apprehended truly when it is seen in the light of an esthetic understanding appropriate to itself, whence their passion for making novel orders of disparate things. I believe they wished to declare the intrinsic dignity of all experience and to declare the senses bathed in revelation—true, serious revelation, the kind that terrifies. (“Hum” 35)

Again, in a 1989 radio interview, Robinson cited the coming together of the physical and spiritual in Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Jonathan Edwards, saying "There was an incredibly rapt and precise and tough-minded *meditative tradition* that has always impressed me," she said (my emphasis). In a sense, *Housekeeping* is a revival of this New England meditative tradition, whose last exemplar, perhaps, was Wallace Stevens. The major terms of Stevens' poetry are "imagination" and "reality." These would serve equally well for *Housekeeping*, since like Stevens' poetry, it is a narrative that explores, but never resolves, problems arising out of the interaction of consciousness and the world.

Before delving into specifics, we should step back to question what it means to revive such a tradition within the context of the late twentieth century. While it might easily be read as

nostalgia, it is best understood as a means of resisting other models of selfhood, an important feature of her “anti-modernist” critique. Robinson disagrees with contemporary writers like Thomas Pynchon who view the self as flattening out under the enormous pressures of bureaucratic, technological modernity. She denies the entire post-war reaction against the Enlightenment (Kantian) assumption that consciousness is at the center of things. Today’s authors and thinkers prefer to think of the self as constituted by history and social pressure and culturally constructed identity, from outside forces rather than inside the mind. Her assumptions about the self are really as old as Shakespeare’s, having their last burst of cultural relevance with some the “stream-of-consciousness” modernists and phenomenologists. The solitary, thinking self that earns pride of place in *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, and that Robinson champions in so many of her essays, is not an anachronism, but a refusal, a critique, a positive alternative vision.

Implicit in this confident view of the self is another refusal, of the idea that an author’s duty to reflect his or her age. Robinson has given every indication that she desires to do no such thing. In the essay “Language is Smarter Than We Are” she makes this clear:

For a long time it has been assumed by American writers that language reflects, or should reflect, the cultural level of its period and subject. This notion perhaps is descended from the old error of imagining that the languages of "primitive" people were primitive. It has been assumed, furthermore, by many, that our cultural median is desolately low. Whole fictions are now made of stringing together brand names, media phrases and minor expletives, the idea being, apparently, that these amount to a demonstration of how reduced people actually are, though they are in fact no more than the statement of a notably ungenerous faith. In any case, the model is wrong. There is no evidence that language contracts to conform itself to any current level of material or spiritual culture.

We moderns have the ability to preserve unmemorable language that other ages would have sloughed. Nevertheless, language remains the great repository of experience in memory, each word a cellule coded with its own history. It shares deeply in the gift and affliction to retain, which confer upon humanity and all the systems of life their miraculous coherency. (3)

This statement about her language reflects the curious absence of name brands, contemporary slang, and modern technology in her writing and her preference to set her stories prior to the 1960s. It also helps explain her emphasis on consciousness in *Housekeeping*. She does not feel an obligation or a desire to be “modern” in the sense of reflecting her age. Just as she is willing to sound archaic to modern ears, she is willing to use concepts about self and consciousness which are archaic to modern sensibilities. As she forcefully put it in one interview: “I’ll do what I want” (244). To translate this ethic of “I’ll do what I want” into literary historical terms, Robinson never made the turn into modernism.

In a sense *Housekeeping* revises literary history, as if modernism, in particular the modernism of Eliot and Pound, never happened. Contemporary authors can simply take their cues from Whitman and Emerson, leap-frog over the modernists (with the exception of Stevens), and write in the tradition of American romanticism. Given her overt aesthetic and political disagreements with certain strains of modernism, it is difficult to imagine Robinson’s project taking the shape that it did without the influence of Pound’s and especially Eliot’s version of modernism on American literary culture.

This brings us back to Ruth’s consciousness. “Emerson and Whitman,” Robinson says in “Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy” “solved the problem of developing a democratic esthetic by finding the origins of poetry in the workings of consciousness, perception and language. An

elegant solution” (2). Whatever complex motivations went into reviving this “elegant solution,” Robinson did so with a high degree of self-consciousness, having studied the American Renaissance as an undergraduate at Pembroke. *Housekeeping* is an amalgamation of this influence, alluding and appropriating language, concepts, metaphors, and symbols from Emerson, Melville, Thoreau, and Dickinson. But perhaps the easiest way to begin exploring this influence is more generally, by considering how Robinson appropriates the nineteenth-century literary habit of metaphor.

Robinson has commented on this unfashionable habit and its broader epistemological and metaphysical implications. In “When I Was a Child I Read Books” she traces the origins of her interest in metaphor back to her high school Latin class led by “Mrs. Bloomsburg who trudged us through Cicero’s vast sentences, clause depending from clause, the whole cantilevered with subjunctives and weighted with a culminating irony” (87). She notes, “It is simply an amusing accident that it should be Cicero, of all people, whose influence I must resist” (87-88). Of course, the other source informing her use of metaphor is the American Romantics:

I love nineteenth-century American literature. And I was particularly impressed with use of metaphor in all the great ones—Melville, Dickinson, Thoreau. It seemed to me that the way they used metaphor was a highly legitimate strategy for real epistemological questions to be dealt with in fiction and poetry. Wallace Stevens, it seems to me, was still doing a very similar thing. That was a large part of my interest in writing the book at all, the feeling that there was something to the idea of experience as emblematic, not a simple “Puritan notion,” but that as Thoreau suggests over and over in his book, and as they all do, in some profound sense, reality is of a piece. It’s sort of like finding a genetic strand that opens a whole genealogy. It seems to me that reality must somehow be describable

as linked through analogue—I mean that rather than a structure in the Euclidean sense, it has a signature quality, and that's basically what [Ruth] does and why she does it and what that mind is. (Schaub 239)

Of course, every literary period puts an emphasis on metaphor. But for Robinson, what distinguishes the American romantics' use of metaphor is the belief that it offers a privileged access to "reality." Thus, it is not metaphor itself but an ideology of metaphor that attracts Robinson, the notion that "reality must somehow be describable as linked through analogue." This ideology of metaphor, as she suggests, has its origins in Puritan culture whose writers used analogical thinking as a way to access to the divine. Jonathan Edwards' *Images or Shadows of Divine Things* is a strong example of this practice. This habit was passed down into Emerson and Dickinson's antebellum New England whose secularizing writers would use it not to access God but Reality. Ruth is a latter-day embodiment of this tradition, building and collapsing metaphors as a means to understand experience and reality, thus bringing this ideology of metaphor into the late twentieth century.

But what are the implications of this ideology? And what does it mean that "reality is of a piece"? Probing these beliefs reveals important assumptions woven into *Housekeeping* about the nature of reality, knowledge, and language. For example, the idea that metaphors are able to reveal a "piece" of reality suggests the idea that reality is a unified totality. Since the finite human mind can never know the whole, a piece of the whole, asserted and then collapsed, suggests the whole. "It's sort of like finding a genetic strand that opens a whole genealogy." And that's the very best humans are capable of, illuminating the unity of reality not through direct means of representation but by indirect means of metaphor. Thus, implicit in this ideology is a pessimism—or some might say, a realism—about the human mind's ability to grasp

totalities. Robinson is fiercely dogmatic regarding the finitude of the human mind, and she has directed an entire book of criticism, *Absence of Mind*, toward traditions of modern thought, particularly positivist science, which assume that human consciousness is capable of grasping all of reality. While she agrees with many contemporary scientists that reality is a unified totality, she disagrees with their optimism that physics will offer a unified description of reality. For her reality will forever remain mysterious and ungraspable.

Thus metaphor is a form of knowledge, but it is always a radically incomplete, partial form of knowledge. Here's Robinson again:

It seems to me that in a way [*Moby-Dick's*] masthead chapter is a classic demonstration of a sort of Emersonian method which is based on the assumption of the inadequacy of the method. That's what is so brilliant about it. You can create an absolutely dazzling metaphor that seems to be resolving things and pulling things together and reconciling things and making sense of things, and then you can collapse the metaphor, and what you're left with is an understanding that's larger than you had before, but finally it is a legitimate understanding because you know it's wrong or you know it's imperfectly partial. I mean, what they are all trying to do is use language as a method of comprehension on the largest scale, at the same time using all the resources of language and absolutely insisting that language is not an appropriate tool. (Schaub 240)

So Robinson uses metaphors with the self-conscious knowledge that the entire method is “inadequate,” that language is “not an appropriate tool” for understanding reality, that it is “imperfectly partial.” And that is exactly what is so brilliant about it, that it assumes absolute knowledge is impossible. Language, confined by the rules of grammar and syntax, always moves toward a false, because closed, sense of order and resolution. The real for Robinson is far

too large and complex to ever be chained down by the false orders of language. It also suggests a role for novelist closely aligned with Wallace Stevens' project: to build and collapse new metaphors in order to suggest new orders of the real and new realms of the possible.

Now take a look at one of Ruth's "dazzling metaphors" to see this method in practice. This is a moment late in Chapter Four where Ruth is trying to comprehend the changes the flood has brought upon Fingerbone:

During those days Fingerbone was strangely transformed. If one should be shown odd fragments arranged on a silver tray and be told, "That is a splinter from the True Cross, and that is a nail paring dropped by Barabbas, and that is a bit of lint from under the bed where Pilate's wife dreamed her dream," the very ordinariness of the things would recommend them. Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy. So shoes are worn and hassocks are sat upon and finally everything is left where it was and the spirit passes on, just as the wind in the orchard picks up the leaves from the ground as if there were no other pleasure in the world but brown leaves, as if it would deck, clothe, flesh itself in flourishes of dusty brown apple leaves, and then drops them all in a heap at the side of the house and goes on. So Fingerbone, or such relics of it as showed above the mirroring waters, seemed fragments of the quotidian held up to our wondering attention, offered somehow as proof of their own significance. But then suddenly the lake and the river broke open and water slid away from the land, and Fingerbone was left stripped and blackened and warped and awash in mud. (73-74)

The reality of transformation sparks the desire to understand the change, which then launches the extended metaphor, as the reader moves with Ruth's mind through playful allusions to Biblical

figures, Barabbas and Pilate's wife, and onto the quotidian images of "shoes" and "hassocks," and natural images of the "dusty brown apple leaves," each offering different figurations on transience and the relation of fragments to wholes. The metaphor is so long and elaborate it is possible to forget what is being imaged until the phrase "so Fingerbone," which connects all of the preceding imagery back to the original object, collapsing the cognitive effort that preceded it. What Robinson intended to achieve is an insight into how Ruth processes and helps create reality, leaving Ruth and the reader with an enhanced, though partial and inadequate, understanding of the flood's destruction.

The full significance of Robinson's use of metaphors, particularly her audacious use of extended metaphors, cannot be understood apart from the literary context of the early 1980s. The ascendant literary trend at the time was Minimalism, whose figurehead was the late Raymond Carver. Minimalism took Hemingway's spare language and made it sparer, stripping away any hint of lyricism, metaphor, and ornamentation in order to render the bare, blighted reality of Carver's lower-middle-class characters. Here's a sample from the story "Vitamins":

I had a job and Patti didn't. I worked a few hours a night for the hospital. It was a nothing job. I did some work, signed the card for eight hours, went drinking with the nurses. After a while, Patti wanted a job. She said she needed a job for her self-respect.

So she started selling multiple vitamins door to door. (245)

As Carver's style moved through major magazines like *The New Yorker* and filtrated through the university's MFA programs, it became dominant and spawned a legion of imitators—but not Robinson:

Especially in writing that was recent at the time I wrote *Housekeeping*, there was an almost puritanical assumption abroad, it seemed, that anything but a kind of plain speech

or almost reduced speech, reduced language, was somehow dishonest or mannered or artificial in the negative sense. And of course I don't believe that at all. I think that anything you can do with language that works justifies itself, and anything is fair, anything is open, including long metaphorical passages that at first don't appear to be going anywhere. (Schaub 245)

The highly rhetorical, metaphorical style of *Housekeeping* is a response to the “puritanical assumption” of Carver’s minimalism and his followers. Ruth’s metaphors are a means to break out of the prison of plain speech, to show how ordinary people, including those on society’s margins, are capable of tremendous imaginative energy. Robinson offers a more optimistic assessment of ordinary American lives than Carver’s bleak, enervated perspective. However, Robinson would not leave behind plain speech and the tendencies of minimalism entirely, for she deploys them in rendering John Ames’ voice in *Gilead*.

One final note on metaphor, or rather, on Robinson’s ideology of metaphor, and that is how it raises larger epistemological problem of uncertainty. For Robinson, uncertainty is a fact, a thing to be enjoyed and never shunned. The rhetoric of uncertainty finds its way into *Housekeeping*, as Ruth acquires the capacity to dwell in unknowing, sculpting possible meanings only to collapse them and start again. Ruth’s speculative moments are often couched in the conditional tense. She prefers words like “if,” “say,” “may,” “must,” “might,” “could,” “should,” and “would”: “One day my grandmother *must* have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring sunlight” (16, my italics). “Soon the skunk cabbage *would* come up, and the cidery smell *would* rise in the orchard, and the girls *would* wash and starch and iron their cotton dresses” (18). “Say that my mother was as tall as a man, and that she sometimes set me on her shoulders, so that I *could* splash my hands in the cold leaves above our heads” (116). And Sylvie

shares Ruth's rhetoric of uncertainty. When Lucille asks Sylvie about the town judge who has the power take children away from their parents, Sylvie replies, "Oh, send them to some place. I think there's a farm or something" (68). Sylvie's language is characterized by an indifference toward uncertainty. She is incapable of anxiety. Her insouciant attitude is present even in her loose, "loopy, liquid" handwriting (77).

Besides metaphor and all of its implications for the novel's conception of mind, reality, knowledge, and language, Robinson makes more specific appropriations from selected individual authors. Melville, for example, is present in *Housekeeping*'s first sentence. "My name is Ruth" nicely recalls "Call me Ishmael." And Robinson has said, "The book I admire most in the world is *Moby-Dick*, after the Bible of course" (Schaub 234). Beyond the obvious allusions, the images of ships and seas, Robinson takes something of the worldview of *Moby-Dick* into her novel. As Ruth sits alone in the woods she thinks: "Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked..." (116). These lines echo the famous speech by Captain Ahab where he claims:

All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event — in the living act, the undoubted deed — there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough. He tasks me; he heaps me; I see in him outrageous strength, with an inscrutable malice sinewing it. That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be the white whale agent, or be the white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him. Talk not to me of blasphemy, man; I'd strike the sun if it insulted me. For

could the sun do that, then could I do the other; since there is ever a sort of fair play herein, jealousy presiding over all creations. (178)

The difference between Ruth and Ahab in this moment is striking. Ahab's active, violent, masculine desire to "strike through the mask"—to penetrate through the realm of appearances in order to destroy the ultimate reality that stands behind—is opposed to Ruth's essentially passive, meditative, ascetic approach to allow the darkness and whatever ultimate reality stands behind it to become coextensive with herself. Another way to figure this opposition is that Ahab wants to maintain the division between self and nature, so as to exalt the self over nature, and Ruth wants to break the division down, so as to maintain an equilibrium between self and nature. What they both share is an essentially Platonic worldview, that behind the shadows of appearance is the light of reality. Martha Ravits views this as "a reinterpretation of nineteenth-century doctrines. Since the time of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville, our fiction has been replete with heavily symbolic representations. It is not surprising, therefore, that Robinson's protagonist also should regard the sensible world 'not as an ultimate reality, but as a system of signs to be deciphered' (650). There are direct allusions to Dickinson, and the house beside the lake brings to mind Thoreau's *Walden*. Sylvie leaves the door and windows open to the "particularities of weather," making the house available to "wasps and bats and barn swallows," a trope appropriated from *Walden* (85). But perhaps more than any other previous author, Robinson takes the most from Emerson.

Emersonian themes and images inform nearly every page of *Housekeeping*. There is a "radical correspondence," Emerson wrote, "between visible things and human thoughts" (31). For him, "every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind" (32). Thomas Schaub put it this way: "Through Ruth's habit of analogy, Robinson reproduces the logic of Emerson's

correspondence between natural and spiritual fact, a correspondence revealed by, or ‘in’ the symbolic perception of, the poetic consciousness. In other words, these similes are ‘Emersonian’ because they express a relationship between the natural world and the world of Ruth’s consciousness or spirit” (311). So the novel’s gloomy atmosphere and menacing landscapes are indebted to the Emersonian idea of correspondence, since Ruth’s subjective mind participates in the constructing reality. This Emersonian mingling of mind and matter is imaged when Ruth remembers finding in the corner of the house some dead leaves along with scraps of paper which read “Powers Meet” and “I think of you.” It’s an image of nature and mind—perhaps the two powers meeting—or of self and other, the “I” thinking of “you”—intermingling within a single space.

Housekeeping’s images of water and its representation of the fluidity of consciousness also owe a considerable debt to Emerson. In “Experience” he writes, “I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition” (286). “...all things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again” (290). Ruth echoes Emerson when she says, ““What is thought, after all, what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate” (162). Emerson and Ruth ask the reader to give up trying to “clutch”—hold, restrict, shackle—reality, to be less “unhandsome,” and admit transience into our mode of thinking and being, the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects.” The result of this Emersonian skepticism is a skepticism toward any form of fixed identity.

In borrowing, appropriating, and revising so much of New England’s literary tradition, Robinson symbolically signals her allegiance to and identification with what is often called the

mainline of American literature. Indeed, she makes little attempt to hide this identification, studding her first novel with allusions and literary tendencies to the New England tradition. Her emphasis, however, is always on consciousness, how this tradition uniquely foregrounds and represents the operations of the mind on reality. It is Ruth's mind where Robinson locates her value and, by extension, the value of her first book. Ruth's imagination is utterly original and individuated—there is no voice like Ruth's in American literature. Her value rests perhaps above all in her ability to surprise the reader, as her watery, shape-shifting consciousness turns by mysterious means into unexpected directions. Her voice shares the same quality of surprise, verging on eccentricity, found in Emerson's whim-inspired essays, in *Moby-Dick's* sudden digressions into cetology, in Dickinson's dashes, and Jonathan Edwards' typological reading of a rose.

Feminizing the Lonesome West

The setting of *Housekeeping* is the small lake-side town of Fingerbone based primarily on Robinson's childhood home of Sandpoint, Idaho. As anyone who has read the novel knows, the setting is hardly a setting in the ordinary sense, as backdrop for a more interesting social drama, but functions instead like a vital character, one whose constant fluctuations of weather, sublime mountainous heights, terrifying lake-bottom lows, and violent releases of energy are reported and felt by the narrator Ruth with a sublime mixture of awe and terror. We read of the "mountains, uncountable mountains" that leave their "puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now, or between the lake as it once was and the lake as it is now" (4-5). There are the "rampages of glaciers in their eons of slow violence [that] had left the landscape in a great disorder" (150). It is a place "chastened by

an outsized landscape and extravagant weather, and chastened again by an awareness that the whole of human history had occurred elsewhere” (62). Another of *Housekeeping*’s achievements is the way it captures the chaos and otherness of the vast spaces of the West, and the implications and meanings of such a brutal, remote place for individuals and communities.

Robinson, of course, grew up in places much like Fingerbone, and in her essay “When I Was a Child I Read Books” she writes fondly of her early memories of rural Washington and Idaho:

I remember when I was a child at Coolin or Sagle or Talache, walking into the woods by myself and feeling the solitude around me build like electricity and pass through my body with a jolt that made my hair prickle. I remember kneeling by a creek that spilled and pooled among rocks and fallen trees with the unspeakably tender growth of small trees already sprouting from their backs, and thinking, there is only one thing wrong here, which is my own presence, and that is the slightest imaginable intrusion—feeling that my solitude, my loneliness, made me almost acceptable in so sacred a place. (87)

A memory such as this must have informed Robinson’s depiction of Ruth alone in the dark woods who “simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones” (116). It is an experience of otherness, not terrifying but sanctifying, made possible by the experience of solitude in nature, a romantic trope if there ever was one, appropriated from Emerson and Thoreau. She writes:

I remember the evenings at my grandparents’ ranch, at Sagle, and how in the daytime we chased the barn cats and swung on the front gate and set off pitchy, bruising avalanches in the wooden shed, and watched my grandmother scatter chicken feed from an apron with huge pockets in it, suffering the fractious contentment of town children rusticated.

And then the cows came home and the wind came up and Venus burned through what little remained of the atmosphere and the dark and emptiness stood over the old house like some unsought revelation (88-89).

These memories of her Western childhood, walks in the woods, images of her grandmother, and intuitions of the sacred, might easily be extracts from the consciousness of Ruth. It almost goes without saying that Robinson put a great deal of her own experience of the West into her imagination of Fingerbone. The idea of remembering old and fabricating new memories of the place must have given her a forceful creative impetus, particularly while writing in France. Perhaps it was simply the pleasure of returning to childhood that inspired her, or perhaps she needed to exorcise the past, so to speak, in order to move forward in her life. Whatever the deep psychological need that stands behind Robinson's West, it is notable that *Housekeeping* and "When I Was a Child I Read Books" are really her only two statements about the place, after which she was able to find imaginative possibilities outside of her childhood experience. Perhaps the twenty-four year gap between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* suggests the difficulty of finding an imaginative resource outside of childhood.

That being said, Robinson has overtly named two lines of motivation for wanting to represent the West. The first came out of her encounter with the East Coast intellectual establishment. When she moved from Idaho to Rhode Island, she found that the New England perception of the West was distorted, clouded by the traditional bias that the East is the home of American intellectual culture. Tony Magagna writes,

With Fingerbone's sense of itself as a place outside of meaningful history, Robinson reflects a common theme of western experience: the West is figured at best as a kind of hinterland where civilization might be possible and at worst as an immense wasteland,

unfit for human habitation. . . . those outside of the West have often labeled the places and ways that have arisen in the region as provincial, subordinate, and of little consequence.

(351-352)

Robinson agrees. She writes, “I went to college in New England and I have lived in Massachusetts for twenty years, and I find that the hardest work in the world—it may in fact be impossible—is to persuade Easterners that growing up in the West is not intellectually crippling” (85). So, she wrote *Housekeeping* to correct this bias:

In a way *Housekeeping* is meant as a sort of demonstration of the intellectual culture of my childhood. It was my intention to make only those allusions that would have been available to my narrator, Ruth, if she were me at her age, more or less. The classical allusions, Carthage sown with salt and the sowing of dragon’s teeth which sprouted into armed men, stories that Ruthie combines, were both in the Latin textbook we used at Coeur d’Alene High School. My brother David brought home the fact that God is a sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. I never thought to ask him where he found it. Emily Dickinson and the Bible were blessedly unavoidable. (86)

For Robinson the West is not just a landscape but a culture, and *Housekeeping* has this cultural politics woven into it, an attempt to claim the legitimacy for an intellectual culture that is often ignored in the national imaginary, perhaps especially intended to reorganize the cultural assumptions of an educated East Coast readership. Indeed, it is difficult to think of one other novel that has its setting in the rural West and a budding intellectual for its protagonist—let alone a *female* intellectual protagonist! For what else is Ruth but an intellectual, a young woman attempting to understand her experience and the world around her? It is her mind, her cognitive

and imaginative power, where Robinson locates her worth. Ruth speculates about Noah's wife, who

When she was old, found somewhere a remnant of the Deluge, she might have walked into it till her widow's dress floated above her head and the water loosened her plaited hair. And she would have left it to her sons to tell the tedious tale of generations. She was a nameless woman, and so at home among all those who were never found and never missed, who were uncommemorated, whose deaths were not remarked, nor their begettings. (172)

She uses the Biblical narrative as a springboard for meditation, this time a meditation on history and those souls that are never recounted, so often women, nameless like Noah's wife, only to be overlooked in the history books of men. Ruth finds a way, using the tools of the intellectual culture available to her, to remember forgotten women, to build a symbolic monument to them. This is just one example of Ruth's beautiful speculation, and the novel's overall message seems to be that if the West can produce such an extraordinary young mind as Ruth's—and perhaps, by extension, an extraordinary mind like Robinson's—then perhaps it is worth reconsidering the geographic loci of intellectual power and status.

Robinson also had another, more central argument to make, not about misperceptions about the culture of the West but about the politics of representations about the West. In an interview she said:

When I was writing *Housekeeping*, one of the things that I was aware of it as being was a novel about the West, in the sense that that's the part of the country where I grew up and my family has lived for a long time. And it's a part of the country that people in general

have a very impoverished imagination of, because it's been so intensely represented in such reductionist terms all these generations. (Schaub 233)

One of the ways she sought to un-impoverish the imagination of the West was to marginalize characters familiar to the art of the West, like Ruth's grandfather, the pioneer figure in search of fortune, and to center the narrative on characters not typically found in the art of the West, namely women:

When I first started writing *Housekeeping* I didn't have in mind that I would suppress male characters to the extent that I did, or exclude them, or whatever I did, but I did think of creating a world that had the feeling of—I don't know what the word is—femaleness about it to the extent that my experience did, and it wasn't because I felt that women had been slighted in that setting but that their presence was ignored in representations of the place. (Schaub 233)

The interviewer then asks, "The West as the place of John Wayne." And Robinson replies, "Exactly."

Sending Edmund to the bottom of Lake Fingerbone in the first few pages takes *Housekeeping's* imagination of the West in a radically new direction. Her redefinition of the West that centers on female experience and female-female bonds has a clear political significance, challenging dominant patriarchal definitions that usually feature some variation on John Wayne's violent heroics. In a way, the character of Sylvie is Robinson's answer to the traditional Western hero:

My one great objection to the American hero was that he was inevitably male—in decayed forms egregiously male. So I created a female hero, of sorts, also an outsider and stranger. And while Sylvie obviously has her own history, to the degree that she has

not taken the impress of society she expresses the fact that human nature is replete with nameless possibilities and, by implication, that the world is accessible to new ways of understanding. (Schaub 92)

Circumscribing this feminist political meaning to a question of place is something Robinson intended, and clearly then part of the overall purpose and meaning of *Housekeeping*. It is sufficient for now to say that Robinson's placing of women in the center of her narrative disrupts the patriarchal tradition of representing the West.

Robinson's desire to feminize the West should be understood as a symptom of the larger feminist movement of the 1970s. While she does have a complex relationship to feminism as a political ideology, and has distanced herself from the idea that *Housekeeping* is a straightforward expression of that ideology, she does admit to have benefitted enormously from the feminist movement:

When I was in college, at Pembroke, which has since disappeared into Brown, we women enjoyed exactly the same rigorous and ambitious education that the men did. Why? One dean explained to us that educated men preferred to have educated wives, and that corporations often interviewed the wife when they made decisions about whom to hire. Education made women socially presentable. This sounds appalling, but I don't think it was ever a real consideration for anyone. The faculty loved to teach, and they taught well, and a certain percentage of those they taught were women. (29)

She goes on to say:

Almost suddenly an expanding field of possibility lay open to women, certainly to me. And also as suddenly I had reasonable uses to make of my brains and my education. By chance I benefitted profoundly from the self-transformation of communities and

institutions that have been most central to my life [...] If I had lived a generation earlier, I might have thought about many of the things that interest me now, but not with the discipline that comes with writing about them or teaching, and not with the rigor that comes with being exposed to response and criticism. And, of course, I would have had no part in conversations that I consider important. So my mind has been formed by the uses I have been able to make of it. It is true for everyone that the experience that society gives to us, or denies us, is profoundly formative. Because I have lived at the cusp of great social change, I am perhaps especially aware of this fact. (29)

Given this acknowledgment, it is curious that Robinson seems uncomfortable with the term “feminism,” which is so clearly the subject of these quotes. It is perhaps her way of avoiding a label as a “feminist” author, a label often ascribed to her but which she herself has never claimed.

Of course, there is a tradition of scholarship which has read *Housekeeping* as a feminist text. Anne-Marie Mallon and Maureen Ryan are the two main proponents of this view, which sees the novel as a celebration of two empowered women that marginalizes the place of men entirely. Robinson, in her 1985 introduction to *The Awakening*, has responded critically to politicized interpretations of literary texts. She writes:

This tendency to read *The Awakening* as a story of oppression and escape is supported by the perception that the novel is a feminist work and by the habit of assuming that feminism must always take conflict between the individualist women and social expectations as its primary subject. In endowing Edna with a compulsion to discover herself by isolating it from all bonds that seem to her to attenuate her identity, Kate Chopin has given her female protagonist the central role, normally reserved for Man, in a

meditation on identity and culture, consciousness and art. This seems to me a higher order of feminism than repeating the story of woman as victim, with its unfortunate tendency to reinforce images we must hope to move beyond. (x)

This remark maps onto *Housekeeping*. In fact, it seems as if Robinson reads *The Awakening* through the lens of *Housekeeping*. Robinson's book is "feminist" insofar as it too centers on a woman and is a "meditation on identity and culture, consciousness and art." Which is to say, it is not "feminist" in a political-ideological sense, a literary call for women's liberation. Many recent scholars agree. Caver represents another tradition in the criticism, along with Jean Wyatt, who see the novel as more ambiguous. But if scholar's trust Robinson's interviews and essays, then there is a way of combining these views. Mallon and Ryan are correct that *Housekeeping* is a feminist text if they limit Robinson's feminist critique not to politics in general but to the politics of representation about the American West. This is fully compatible with Robinson's views and also symptomatic of the 1970s feminism to which she was exposed. And furthermore it avoids seeing the entire novel as an ideological production, essentially intended to advance the interests of women, when Caver and Wyatt rightly suggest that the novel is far too subtle and ambiguous to be deemed a piece of ideological propaganda. Magagna summarizes Robinson's feminist achievement well when he writes:

Robinson replaces women as independent agents in western history and writes their experiences back into the story of the West. She suggests in the end that there are more ways than one to define western place, that the open spaces of the West can still be open to new ways of living that do not simply repeat the past hierarchies and patriarchies of other places. The West can be open to all interpretations, to all visions and versions, whether male or female, majority or marginal, settled or transient. There can be, as

Robinson herself has come to learn and to teach, "a place in the West for my West."

(171)

Housekeeping, then, offers a re-imagination of the West, one which highlights its intellectual culture and the experience of women. She joins a tradition of authors who have attempted to capture the West in prose. Magagna writes,

Whether chronicling titanic mountains or expansive, unmarked plains, the writers of the West have often described the immense spaces and the raw wilderness that dominate the experiences of their characters; they have emphasized the importance of maintaining a sense of place within the seemingly empty, hostile landscapes. Such early authors of the settled West as Willa Cather, O.E. Rolvaag, and Mari Sandoz—writing from and of the Great Plains—dramatized the blank territories of the West, far removed from the recognized centers of culture, resource, and tradition; the vast spaces in the works of these writers threatened to overwhelm any sense of self or purpose for the characters, and their initial struggle was to somehow mark the land—to redefine raw space as their place.

(346)

So what else does Robinson bring to this tradition? For one thing, Robinson's West is lonelier, less peopled than the space of her predecessors. In many ways, Ruth couldn't be lonelier, having lost her mother and grandmother, leaving her mute with grief. Her lines of dialogue are very few, and she spends the better part of the novel in silence, thinking. There is considerable irony in the contrast between what the reader knows to be Ruth's brilliant mind and what the other characters see as the dull girl with nothing to say. Loneliness is the moral condition of the West. Robinson explains, "A man in Alabama asked me how I felt the West was different from the East and the South, and I replied that in the West 'lonesome' is a word with strongly positive

connotations” (88). She speculates that “only lonesomeness allows one to experience this sort of radical singularity, one’s greatest dignity and privilege. Understanding this permits one to understand the sacred poetry in strangeness, silence, and otherness. The vernacular form of this idea is the Western hero, the man of whom nothing can ever really be known” (90). As Sylvie says, “It’s the loneliness...Loneliness bothers lots of people” (66). Even Robinson’s description of the West as “the orphan child of a brilliant century” suggests the loneliness of the orphaned Ruth and Lucille, both of whom desire to be adopted and cared for above anything else.

Robinson’s West also forcefully registers the harshness, hostility, and inhumanity of the landscape. Fingerbone’s landscape is only initially conceived by Ruth’s grandfather as an “open” frontier, promising wealth and adventure, a testing ground for self-reliance. Once the Stone family is settled, it becomes a place of towering otherness, harsh, violent, cold, and radically unstable:

There are mountains, uncountable mountains, and where there are not mountains there are hills...It seems there was a time when the dimensions of things modified themselves, leaving a number of puzzling margins, as between the mountains as they must have been and the mountains as they are now, or between the lake as it once was and the lake as it is now. (5)

Robinson imagines an undomesticated west, the west of the frontier, whose scale and flux lack the niceties and order necessary for human habitation. This experience of nature untamed almost suggests a metaphysical position, nature not as God’s loving Creation but the heretical Gnostic view of nature as the source of frustration, evil, and death. *Housekeeping*’s sense of the destructive forces of nature, mediated by the traumatized consciousness of Ruth, recalls Emily Dickinson’s poem 1624:

Apparently with no surprise
 To any happy Flower
 The Frost beheads it at its play –
 In accidental power –
 The blonde Assassin passes on –
 The Sun proceeds unmoved
 To measure off another Day
 For an Approving God – (667)

Dickinson's speaker's report of the "happy Flower['s]" beheading, and her conclusion that this suggests an "accidental power" that God is powerless to prevent, have a rough similarity to Ruth's observation of landscape. Both views emerge from grief. The landscape and its metaphysical implications cannot be disassociated from Ruth's subjectivity, which in turn is cruelly marred by the tragic loss of her grandfather and, most devastating, the loss of her mother Helen. It would be erroneous to say that Robinson and Ruth's share the same view of nature. *Housekeeping* assumes a divide between author and speaker in an analogous way that lyric poetry assumes such a divide. Ruth is a *dramatis personae*. Her grieved consciousness resembles so many of Dickinson's own *dramatis personae*. Whether Robinson had by the late 1970s formed her Judeo-Christian belief in Creation does not change this aesthetic assumption. She may have "agreed" or "disagreed" with Ruth, but, whatever the case, the view is entirely Ruth's. This means that we can assume other characters see the world differently. Though we are denied her subjective perspective, it is entirely plausible that Lucille, Ruth's sister, perceives landscape differently, perhaps less dreadfully, perhaps in a more conventionally, optimistically "western" way.

However unpromising the actual place of Fingerbone is, and however unaccommodating it is to fantasies of freedom and prosperity, the idea of the frontier is never far from Robinson's conception of the West. While *Housekeeping* might be read as a counter-narrative to frontier mythology, particularly with regard to Edmund, whose train-accident death signals the end of at least masculine frontier desire, in fact the novel offers a reorientation of the frontier. The frontier is no longer regarded in spatial terms but is a term of consciousness, the space of the mind.

As Robinson knows, the frontier is a historically loaded term which has come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. For as an organizing cultural concept in the early nineteenth century, the frontier gave moral legitimacy to the savage removal of Native populations. Yet Robinson does not want to discard the notion entirely. "The frontier," she writes, "was neither a place nor a thing, neither a time nor a historical condition. At the simplest level, it amounted to no more than the movement of European-origin people into a part of the world where they had no business being [...] The same thing had happened on every continent, save Antarctica" (90). Acknowledging the injustice of the frontier does not mean it was entirely bad. "By the standards that apply to events of its kind, the Western settlement had a considerable positive content" (91). This positive content includes the ideal of individualism and "a considerable optimism about what people were and what they might become" (92). In recent years these frontier ideals have become unpopular:

I think it is fair to say that the West has lost its place in the national imagination because, by some sad evolution, the idea of human nature has become the opposite of what it was when the myth of the West began, and now people who are less shaped and constrained by society are assumed to be disabled and dangerous. This is bad news for the American psyche, a fearful and antidemocratic idea, which threatens to close down change. I think

it would be a positively good thing for the West to assert itself in the most interesting terms, so that the whole country must hear and be reanimated by dreams and passions it has too casually put aside and too readily forgotten. (93-94)

In a sense, *Housekeeping* is an attempt to reignite those lost frontier “dreams and passions,” and it does this primarily by resisting the desire to “close down change.”

As even the first critics of *Housekeeping* noticed, one of the book’s great themes is change, and the words “transience” and “mutability” have often been used to describe what the novel is about. The Picador paperback includes a quote from critic Paul Gray that says the book “brilliantly portrays the impermanence of all things, especially beauty and happiness.” What scholars have missed in discussions of this theme is how strongly Robinson associates transience with the western frontier. Openness to change, the bold charging into the new, is what Robinson celebrates about the frontier, and this is manifested in epistemological terms with Ruth and spiritual terms with Sylvie. To quote Dickinson, the frontier means to “dwell in possibility” (657). “Perhaps,” Robinson says, “it was a misfortune for us that so many interesting ideas were associated with access to a habitable wilderness. The real frontier need never close. Everything, for all purposes, still remains to be done” (92). The West, then, is the space of possibility, of epistemological, moral, political, even metaphysical change. As Martha Ravits put it, “The frontier in this contemporary novel is not a geographic or historic construct but the urge to move beyond conventional social patterns, beyond the dichotomy of urban and rural experience, beyond domestic concerns and physical boundaries into metaphysics” (666). The image of Ruth and Sylvie crossing the bridge at the end of the novel is a metaphor for frontier desire, of stepping into nameless possibility.

Housekeeping is western in one last crucial way: it is a place of small society. It is a place closer to nature than civilization, and so without the cultural and social status of the city. The house in Fingerbone is built atop a hill, so the flood waters do not pose any mortal danger to the girls. This relative safety is a consistent note throughout the novel, as the girls never really have to struggle for material necessities, food, shelter, and clothing. There is no material excess, but there is always enough. This aloof distance from the community suggests the almost total absence of community spirit which characterizes the Fisher family. Their isolation from the fate of the town speaks to the resolutely individualistic vision that Robinson pursues, a value consistent with the mythological ethos of the Far West. For Ruth and Sylvie at least, the community and its conformist values are the supreme threat to individual liberty.

***Housekeeping* as Romance**

Housekeeping is deeply ambivalent about the demands of society. They are figured as either temptation and escape (for Lucille) or threat and menace (for Ruth and Sylvie). The book really doesn't allow a space for judging whether Lucille's decision to conform or Ruth and Sylvie's decision to escape is right or wrong. Moral judgments seem out of place in a narrative more interested in exploration and meditation than in the stark, black-and-white moral worlds of melodrama. But the fact that there is a probing ambiguity about life in society does have implications for the question of genre, since *Housekeeping* seems to depart from the mainline tradition of the "novel," which has always attended to the manners, morality, and fate of humans *in* society. In light of this, it is questionable whether *Housekeeping* should be considered a "novel" at all.

Obviously this depends on what one means by a “novel.” In his study on the American novel, Richard Chase was the first to posit a bias toward romance in the tradition. By “romance” he means a collection of qualities and characteristics:

An assumed freedom from the ordinary novelistic requirements of verisimilitude, development, and continuity; a tendency towards melodrama and idyll; a more or less formal abstractness and, on the other hand, a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness; a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly. (ix)

Anyone familiar with *Housekeeping* will immediately recognize it in this description.

Housekeeping does not pile up material details for the purposes of verisimilitude; its events have only a loose causality. One can easily classify it as a pastoral idyll, the same classification of the Book of Ruth. Ruth’s abstract intelligence is central and the negative emotional atmosphere of mourning and melancholia certainly qualifies as an “underside of consciousness.” Moral questions, questions of right and wrong in relation to one’s neighbors, are abandoned because Ruth and Lucille exist for most of the book outside the spectacle of society.

When we add a few other of Chase’s “romance” tendencies—novels which have “rapidity, irony, abstraction, profundity,” are excited by “intellectual energy,” focused on “highly wrought fragments rather than massive unities,” sustain mystery and bewilderment—we can see many of the major generic qualities of *Housekeeping*. It sounds as if Chase is describing Ruth’s allusions and metaphors when he says that life may be felt indirectly, through legend, symbol, or allegory. And do not Lily and Nona and to a certain extent Sylvie have an “abstracted simplicity”? The American novel, according to Chase, has been “stirred...by the aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder,” as it has focused on the

individual outside society (2). As Henry James defined the romance in his preface to *The American*:

The only *general* attribute of projected romance that I can see, the only one that fits all its cases, is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, is embroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it and, if we wish so to put the matter, drag upon it, and operating in a medium which relieves it, in a particular interest, of the inconvenience of a *related*, a measurable state, a state subject to all our vulgar communities. (33)

Certainly *Housekeeping* would qualify under James' famous definition. Of course, it is hardly an air-tight fit to place the entire narrative in Chase and James' romance category. There are elements of humor and satire that clearly fall outside of romance proper. But the idea of *Housekeeping* as a romance has the kind of loose, general sort of applicability that characterizes all definitions of genre. Why other scholars have failed to notice this may have something to do with how unfashionable genre definitions are today. But the meaning of romance is not only useful as a description of the book's content, but also touches on some wider, cultural implications.

Robinson goes to great lengths to place her characters in a situation of maximum freedom from society. The absence of obvious economic pressures creates a space for Robinson to pursue larger questions of competing philosophies of life, of ethics, how different individuals choose to live. There is really no sense of anomie or nihilism or the pointlessness of questing, of desire, but *Housekeeping* puts tremendous importance on the choice of one's path in life—the Romantic quest. The whole network of social and economic relations—the life of the community—is

barely mentioned, perhaps because of Ruth's age, but also the book seems to have a relaxed attitude toward labor and material acquisition in general, as if the West were the space for higher quests than the merely materialistic. Ruth's speculative idyll could not be more distant from the anxious bustle of bourgeois urban life.

In the Introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne talks about the necessity for the American author of finding "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (24). The idea of American romance is a kind of "border" fiction, occupying a middle ground between the actual and imaginary in Hawthorne and Melville or between the wilderness and civilization in the novels of James Fenimore Cooper. Robinson's first novel falls neatly within this tradition of border fiction, as many critics have suggested, resisting the novel's tendency to remain firmly in the actual.

If we accept that Robinson does self-consciously appropriate this romance impulse in the American tradition, that she, in a sense, wants to write her way into this tradition, it does open up a broader ideological question, specifically that Robinson is attempting to write an *American* novel, a novel marked by a national generic brand, which is opposed to the English tradition of the novel. Again, these are very broad generalizations, since the very idea of One Great National Tradition has come under enormous strain. But whether scholars accept or reject this idea is one thing and quite another is whether the author accepts or rejects this idea of national tradition. Robinson, rightly or wrongly, is committed to the idea of a *nationally*-defined literary culture. *Housekeeping* can be read as an argument for the existence of a national tradition along the lines that Chase outlines. Yet, the national tradition that Robinson self-consciously appropriates is narrowly defined. As already mentioned, it is the tradition of New England, of Edwards,

Dickinson, Melville, and Wallace Stevens. Thus, it runs in opposition to other important national traditions, including the Southern and perhaps more relevantly, the Western tradition of Twain, Hemingway, and Carver. It is another element of Robinson's strangeness that she decided to frame the West with a New England consciousness. It must come from the experience of being raised in Idaho and finding an imaginative and spiritual home in Massachusetts.

There is also an international dimension to Robinson's definition of a national tradition. With *Housekeeping's* self-conscious appropriation of these romance tendencies Robinson essentially wrote a book against the much more sociable English model. If *Middlemarch* and *Moby-Dick* can stand for the opposition between the English and American novel, then it is clear from the very beginning—"My name is Ruth," recalling "Call me Ishmael"—which tradition Robinson is standing with and against. Robinson's next book *Mother Country*, a three-hundred page assault on British civilization might be seen as an extension of *Housekeeping's* ideological nationalism standing against the British tradition. Certainly Henry James would have seen in *Housekeeping* evidence for the "rich passion...for extremes" that he associated with American writing generally, and which Robinson associates with the experience of the West.

Chapter Two

The Confession: *Gilead*

If *Housekeeping* is a coming-of-age narrative, then *Gilead* might be called a coming-of-death narrative. A Congregationalist minister living in Gilead, Iowa in 1956, John Ames has recently diagnosed with a terminal heart condition. With his remaining days he writes a letter to his young son Robbie, saying everything he would tell the boy were he to live longer. As Laura Tanner put it, Ames attempts to counter “embodied absence with representational presence” (227). Many of the stories he tells his son concern fathers leaving sons. He tells of his grandfather who, inspired by a vision of Jesus in chains, moves from Maine to Kansas to fight for abolition and the Union cause, only to grow bitter and disappointed by his son’s generation’s lack of conviction. He abandons Gilead and his own family to die angry and alone in the wilderness of Kansas. Ames also tells the story of his father who rebelled against the violence of the grandfather, preaching pacifism and holding to the status-quo, but who late in life loses his faith and abandons Gilead along with his son to live on the Gulf Coast with Ames’ atheist brother Edward. Ames writes his story, too, tales from childhood, his journey with his father to Kansas to find his grandfather’s grave, stories of his early manhood, marrying Louisa who died giving birth to Angeline who also died, and the long period of darkness and despair. Late in life he meets and marries Lila, they have Robbie, and together enjoy a few last years of domestic happiness.

Stories from the past are mixed with the present. There is the ordinary beauty of Ames’ domestic life, the glory of nature, and lines of poetry and the Bible. There is also Ames’ friendship with Robert Boughton, another aging minister, whose prodigal and most-beloved son, Jack, has returned to Gilead after years of exile. It is Jack who finally matters most to *Gilead*. A

prankster in his youth, Jack scandalized the community by impregnating a poor, young woman. After she gave birth to his daughter he abandoned them, resulting in a lack of care and provision and eventually the death of the child. Jack's return to Gilead triggers nothing but anxiety and anger for Ames. He resents Jack for abandoning his child and leaving her for dead, when Ames only got to hold his daughter for a moment before she perished. This old incident colors Ames' perception of Jack, and so he fears Jack's influences on what Ames most values: his family. His fear grows as he sees Robbie playing catch with Jack who is so much younger and more agile—more suited to be a father really—than Ames. And his fear takes on the cast of jealousy when he sees how his wife and Jack get along. The two have much in common as outsiders to Gilead's small community. This jealousy, fear, and resentment caused by Jack pulls Ames into the present, into one last trial of agonized conscience, one last opportunity for him to trust God and practice grace.

Although Ames will not abandon Gilead as his father and grandfather did, he knows that he will abandon his son, as all fathers must when they die. *Gilead* affirms the sorrowful truth that loss, suffering, and disappointment are unavoidable in life. Yet there are grounds for hope. There is the wonder of nature, the pleasures of baseball and books, and the ordinary goodness of human kindness. There is the hope in an afterlife, even though Ames is hopeless in his ability to imagine it. Ultimately there is the mysterious operation of divine grace, embodied in the most powerful moment of the book when Ames places his hand on Jack to bless him. Montaigne said, "To philosophize is to learn how to die" (89). *Gilead* philosophizes in this same sense, as we witness Ames' difficult but ultimately redemptive education in learning how to die.

Minding the Publishing Gap

The shift in prose style and thematic content from *Housekeeping*'s to *Gilead*'s raises important questions about the relationship between the two novels and what conclusions can be drawn from Robinson's literary silence from 1980 to 2004. This publishing gap was often commented upon in reviews of *Gilead* and for good reason, since it is a remarkable amount of time not to publish for a fiction writer whose first book was such a success.

On this score it is worth mentioning that Robinson's "literary silence" is a myth. Robinson did publish one piece of short fiction in 1985 with *The Paris Review*, a short story called "Connie Bronson." Robinson also published two books of non-fiction, *Mother Country* and *The Death of Adam* essay, as well as numerous other essays and book reviews. Aside from writing, she taught literature and creative writing and gained her position at the University of Iowa. In other words, she was living a literary life, only it did not involve the composition of fiction.

Still, the question of the publishing gap does invite some biographical speculation. Perhaps it says something about Robinson's character as a writer, that she is an unrepentant Emersonian individualist, following her genius wherever it takes her, regardless of genre or critical praise, making her a kind of saint of individualism. Although there is some truth to this characterization—she projects a sense of herself as deeply private in life and dogmatically individualistic in her beliefs—it is equally possible that Robinson simply experienced a drought of fictional ideas after the opening salvo of *Housekeeping*. She may have had a case of the Ralph Ellison-Harper Lee-J.D. Salinger complex.

The deeper question of the gap is whether Robinson changed as a novelist from *Housekeeping* to *Gilead*. On the surface at least, she appears to have changed entirely.

Housekeeping is about mothers and daughters and *Gilead* is about fathers and sons.

Housekeeping is indebted to the American Romantics and Transcendentalists and *Gilead* is indebted to Calvinism. Even stylistically she appears to have changed, with Ruth's wild lyrical digressions replaced by Ames' essayistic calm. This looks like a revolution in Robinson's concerns and style, a major shift in the author's own identity.

But, as the saying goes, looks are deceiving. The change from *Housekeeping* to *Gilead* is not revolution but clearly a development. Robinson's literary identity was firmly established at the writing of *Housekeeping*, and her first book contains many of the seeds out of which her second book grew. As for the idea that Robinson became increasingly religious in *Gilead*, this implies that *Housekeeping* was somehow "less religious," that it was not informed by the Bible and the Presbyterian culture of her childhood. As we saw in Chapter One, this is not a view that holds weight. It is nearer the truth to say that her religious vision sharpened, that she becomes self-conscious about her religious identity after *Housekeeping*. This was prompted by her reading of John Calvin, sometime after 1989 when she took the job at Iowa, which she spoke about in an interview with Scott Hoezee.

I was brought up in an atmosphere I learned in retrospect to recognize as Presbyterian. (At the time, it just seemed like the way of the world.) I became a Congregationalist in Massachusetts. These are two scions of the tree of Calvinism, of course, but I don't think that was ever pointed out to me, except once or twice in an American literature class in college. The fact had no apparent significance for me. Then, here at the Iowa Workshop, I decided to teach a seminar on *Moby Dick*. That book is so filled with theology that I decided I should read the theology it would most likely be responding to. So I read Calvin's *Institutes*. Not only did this greatly illuminate my reading of Melville, and his

contemporaries, it also made me understand much more about the religious culture I had very passively received. (Hoezee)

In light of this, we might say that *Housekeeping* is subconsciously religious whereas *Gilead* and its successor *Home* are consciously religious. Like Robinson before her reading of Calvin, Ruth has passively received the Bible-centered Presbyterian culture of Robinson's youth. And like Robinson after reading Calvin, Ames is an active Congregationalist self-conscious about the religious tradition he thinks and feels within. So, while it is true that *Gilead* and its successor novel *Home* are indeed more overtly about religion than *Housekeeping*, all three novels share a common religious imagination, informed by Robinson's life-long immersion in Protestant Christianity and the Bible. *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* share a common culture core that undergoes a process of self-conscious definition over time. It is this cultural core that constitutes the unifying force behind Robinson's novelistic sensibility. Its presence means that the twenty-four-year break from fiction-writing does not imply a radical break or schism between the early and later work.

While there are major differences between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead*, several lines of development can be established, beginning with the titles. Robinson's preference for the one word title is consistent with her aesthetic preference for simplicity and austerity, but there are important differences in the kinds of words she chooses for titles. While *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* share a common footing in place, they differ in the sense that *Housekeeping* is an abstraction, a gerund, and *Gilead* is a specific place, a noun. While subtle, this shift signals a profound shift in Robinson's thematic interests.

First of all, it is a shift into the particularity of history. The activity of "housekeeping" takes place in every home no matter the place, and this universal quality is reflected in the

difficulty readers have in locating the world of *Housekeeping* in a specific time and place. It is only through the references to popular literature—Ruth reads *Not As a Stranger*—that we can place Fingerbone in the 1950s. Gilead is different in that its time and place are unmistakable:

The town of Gilead, an imaginary town that figures in my last two novels, is modeled on Tabor, in the southwest corner of Iowa. Tabor was founded by a group from Oberlin, including their leader, Reverend John Todd. It was intended to serve, and did serve, as a fallback for John Brown and others during the conflict in Kansas...History has ebbed away from Tabor since then, but it would be difficult to estimate the impact of this one little settlement on American culture and world culture. (*When* 180)

Robinson did not call *Housekeeping Fingerbone* for good reason, since it was not overly concerned with the origins and history of Fingerbone. *Gilead* is properly titled because the narrator, John Ames, is very concerned with the origins and history of the town, and its generations of inhabitants. If the main concern of *Housekeeping* is the fate of a household, *Gilead* suggests a more expansive perspective: the fate of a city. In *Gilead*, Robinson plucks the small thread of history from the first few pages of *Housekeeping*, the journey of the grandfather westward, and weaves a great tapestry of history into *Gilead*. History is one of *Gilead's* great themes, and the idea that this small town has an impact on “American culture and world culture” is one of the book’s ambitious claims.

Besides this entrance into history, the shift from *Housekeeping* to *Gilead* also suggests a different attitude toward community. Put simply, *Housekeeping* is about whether to accept community and *Gilead* is about how to live within community. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth’s house is situated at a distance from community, literally placed atop a hill. Community in Fingerbone, represented by the school or the sheriff, are experienced as intrusions into the private sphere,

either welcomed for Lucille or unwelcomed for Ruth and Sylvie. It is possible to reject community entirely, as Ruth and Sylvie do, and set off on the road as transients. This perspective on community is essentially one of youth. Youthful characters like Ruth and Lucille experience community as a dilemma of conformity.

Gilead takes the idea of community from *Housekeeping* and treats it from a different perspective. *Gilead*'s characters are either middle-aged or elderly, thus excluding the perspective of youth and the dynamics of coming-of-age. *Gilead* assumes the self is social, is always in relation to others, plunged into a network of roles and responsibilities within both the family and the community. The idea of the social self is reflected in the epistolary form. A letter cannot exist without an author and an addressee. This represents a development from the more autonomous, individualistic idea of subjectivity in *Housekeeping*. This is in keeping with *Gilead*'s ethical theme of how to live in community and its larger political concerns regarding race and religion. The questions it asks concern the boundaries of these roles and responsibilities: How far should one go to help a neighbor in need? How does one forgive a neighbor for irredeemable harm? The conflicts, tensions, and anxieties of community life are at the heart of *Gilead*. It is a shift from domestic life into political life—the house among other houses; the individual among neighbors—which the title *Gilead* suggests.

While *Housekeeping* is full of numerous Biblical allusions, Robinson's second novel makes this relationship more direct. In the Hebrew Bible, Gilead is a place of violence. The prophet Hosea says, "Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood," referring to men from Gilead who participated in the assassination of King Pekahiah (chronicled in 2 Kings 15.25) (1266). Robinson imports this association into an American context by exploring Gilead's role in the violence of American abolitionism and the Civil War. Robinson traces the guilt of

violence through several generations, asking questions about whether any good, including the good of abolitionism, is worth the cost of blood. The Biblical association of Gilead with violence also contains its opposite association in the phrase the “balm of Gilead.” The “balm of Gilead” is mentioned throughout the Bible as a metaphor for healing and instruction. A famous African American spiritual puts it this way: “There is balm in Gilead/To make the wounded whole//There's power enough in heaven,/To cure a sin-sick soul.” These contradictory Biblical meanings, both violence and salvation, are overlaid onto *Gilead*'s representation of history, war, the Depression, and race relations in the 1950s.

In terms of the content of the two novels, both *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* are essentially variations on the domestic novel, which means that both are deeply invested in the metaphor and *topos* of “home.” *Housekeeping* consistently challenges traditional ideas of the home, especially with regard to how the home shapes and limits female identity. Although the exact meaning of the burning of the home remains ambiguous, it is certainly the case that *Housekeeping* registers an ambivalence about the space of the house and the work of housekeeping. In *Gilead*, Robinson highlights characters more at home with home. Domesticity, the bourgeois family is not a source of anxiety but rather an achievement to be praised, affirmed. John Ames only wishes he had more days to spend with his family whose presence stands as a continual source of joy and renewal. But this positive view of home is limited. There is Jack Boughton's homelessness. And when Ames says, “I didn't feel very much at home in the world, that was a fact. Now I do,” we sense the irony that his homecoming coincides with his imminent death (4). What both novels share is an emphasis on the impermanence of home. Whether the house is run by Sylvie or Lila, whether the household is happy or unhappy, whether the home is burned or remains standing, Robinson insists on the transience of all forms of human settlement. The security and

significance of home are always temporary. Robinson's transient homes affirm the idea that after Eden humans are essentially, metaphysically homeless.

Finally, the major shift from *Housekeeping* to *Gilead* concerns gender. The female-centered Book of Ruth and its themes of loss, abandonment, and loyalty are replaced by the male-centered Prodigal Son parable and its themes of rebellion, reconciliation, and grace. However, there are some important overlaps, namely the fact that both novels center on establishing of relationships outside the immediate family structure. Ruth cleaves to Sylvie, her aunt. Ames blesses Jack, his best friend's son. In both novels Robinson is concerned with the possibilities of community outside filial structures, and both novels affirm the possibility of such communities. It speaks to Robinson's liberal optimism that sympathy and generosity can extend beyond the limits of the bourgeois family.

Robinson's emphasis on male experience in *Gilead* is not a betrayal of her feminist credentials but an opportunity to meditate on another cultural tradition, the discourse on fathers and sons. Ames says, "John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. By 'my son' I mean another self, a more cherished self. That language isn't sufficient, but for the moment it is the best I can do" (189). While Ames acknowledges the radical insufficiency of language for representing the relationship, he nevertheless affirms that Jack is his "son" in some spiritual sense, and in this acknowledgment and the climatic blessing of Jack, Robinson leaves open the possibility that fathers and sons can be defined by forgiveness. Knowing Robinson's particular ire toward Freud, evidenced most explicitly in her essay "The Freudian Self" in *Absence of Mind*, *Gilead* might be thought of as a revision of the Freudian Oedipal struggle, a challenge to father-son competition by opening it to the possibility of mystery and grace.

***Gilead* as Confession**

Robinson frames Ames' story by reviving the genre of confession. The earliest example of such a work is Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (4th C.), and the form was later modernized by Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1781). The confession genre is a rather vague category that covers works which provide "a very personal and subjective account of experiences, beliefs, feelings, ideas, and states of mind, body and soul" ("Confessional literature" 174). In Northrop Frye's discussion of the confession in *Anatomy of Criticism*, he writes, "Nearly always some theoretical and intellectual interest in religion, politics, or art plays a leading role in the confession" (308). He says, "The confession is....introverted, but intellectualized in content" (308). This exactly captures *Gilead*'s combination of introverted subjective experience and its intellectual interest in religion and politics. *Gilead* takes what is most subjective about the romance tradition and combines it with larger intellectual interests: the schoolgirl Ruth becomes the bookish Ames. However, by the end of *Gilead* most of the intellectual content is replaced by the personal relationship between Ames and Jack Boughton, and it is clear that Robinson is pushing beyond confession and into the novel, the genre she develops most fully in *Home*.

Robinson may have been attracted to the confession through her study of the Puritans and one of their favorite genres, the spiritual autobiography. For the Puritans, spiritual autobiography attested to the belief that "God was consistent in his dealing with men throughout history, but since he called everyone individually, each saw some aspect of His glory that was hidden from others" (Watkins 2). Christopher Leise identifies two Puritan texts as models for *Gilead*, Anne Bradstreet's "To My Dear Children" and Thomas Shepard's *Autobiography*, which were "written by parents contemplating their imminent demise to their children as a vehicle for the transmission of spiritual belief" (252).⁴ Anne Bradstreet's intentions in "To My Dear

Children” are “to compose some short matters (for what else to call them I know not) and bequeath to you, that when I am no more with you, yet I may be daily in your remembrance (although that is the least in my aim in what I now do), but that you may gain some spiritual advantage by my experience” (280). John Ames’ letter to his son embodies both of these desires, to be remembered and for his son to gain a spiritual advantage from his experience. Ames, however, is modern in the sense that he is far less certain about what he wants to say, more frustrated by his cognitive limitations. “I’m trying to make the best of our situation. That is, I’m trying to tell you things I might never have thought to tell you if I had brought you up myself, father and son, in the usual companionable way. When things are taking their ordinary course, it is hard to remember what matters” (102). Robinson’s modern twist on Puritan spiritual autobiography is typical of her paradoxical traditional-progressivism. While she is clearly interested in working within tradition and acknowledging her debt to the past, she adamantly refuses to be enslaved by or nostalgic about the past.

Robinson’s decision to tell Ames’ story in the form of a letter or epistle also has important consequences for the book’s meaning. *Gilead* is that rare thing in contemporary fiction: an epistolary novel. John Ames announces the form from the very beginning, saying “If you’re a grown man when you read this—it is my intention for this letter that you will read it then—I’ll have been gone a long time” (3). *Gilead* can be profitably read alongside the few other recent attempts to revive this form such, as John Barth’s *Letters* (1979). For Barth, the epistolary form is an opportunity for postmodern, parodic play. It’s an antiquated, irrelevant form, which can be ironically appropriated. Robinson uses it for other purposes. In an interview she admitted that it surprised her to be writing an epistolary novel since the form never appealed to her before, though the appeal of the form is understandable. On the one hand, it lends *Gilead*

an immediate historical atmosphere, since the letter is now anachronistic, having been outmoded by later forms such as email. On the other hand, the form has a Christian resonance due to Saint Paul's famous epistles. Needless to say *Gilead* is not typical of the epistolary form, where there is usually found an exchange of letters between interlocutors. Letters here are not sent back and forth, read and replied to. At times *Gilead*'s one-sided rhetorical arrangement seems more epitaph than epistle. But it is most likely that the form appealed to Robinson for literary reasons; for similar reasons it appealed to Richardson when he sat down to write *Pamela* (1740). The epistolary form excels at three literary qualities found in *Gilead*: It is amenable to a loose, digressive narrative structure; it allows for a complex rendering of human consciousness; and it encourages an intimate, confessional tone.

Gilead's narrative structure is anything but linear. The novel is fractured into blocks of text which vary in length from a few words to several pages. Ames moves from thought to thought without an easily discernible logic. The perception of his child's hair leads him to ponder the expression "the twinkling of an eye" which leads him to the memory of his first wife Louisa. And we follow Ames, as would his son, on this trail of memory, perception, abstract thought, pangs of conscience, and desire, moving from past to present to the questionable future, never assured where Ames will go next. Eventually this loose structure tightens, sharpening to a point, focused on one man, Jack Boughton, only to be released back into slackness at the very end.

This kind of structure is easily accommodated by the epistolary form since it is not based on action, event, or incident, which tends to compress narrative into conventional, linear plot lines. Letter writing is fundamentally in tension with the jolting forward momentum of plotting, which is why it is exceptionally well suited for action-less, incident-free, near plot-less narratives

of the sort Robinson is drawn to, narratives that occupy a space closer to the essay than conventional realist fiction, narratives that eschew the bodily heat of plot for the cooler moods of the mind, narratives that sit in one place, fist under chin, reflecting, meditating, brooding.

But a series of loosely related fragments does not a novel make. There still has to be connective tissue that binds the parts together into a whole. In typical realist fiction the connective tissue is plot. In *Gilead* the connective tissue is primarily emotion. The fragments are held together by a subtle kind of lyrical threading, closely related to the kind of emotional coherence a traditional lyric speaker gives to her poetic material: a consistency of tone, a careful patterning of imagery, and the delicate management of emotion. Like *Housekeeping*, whose lyrical movement *Gilead* shares, once the reader taps into this emotional layer and learns to read the novel like poetry, *Gilead* begins to cohere and resonate and build in beauty, and the absence of traditional plotting becomes entirely forgivable. An example of this kind of lyrical-emotional movement can be traced on the first few pages, as Ames passes through several paragraphs of dark emotions, fear of death, regret, and guilt, and then arrives at the paragraph which begins “I can hear you talking with you mother” which turns him toward the light of beauty, hope, and love (5). Suddenly enraptured Ames says, “I really can’t tell what’s beautiful anymore,” a sentence whose pathos was impossible to imagine two pages before (5). The source of this kind of emotional movement is obviously lyric poetry; for Robinson this means everything from the Psalms to Emily Dickinson. Another influence is Emerson’s essays which are an example of how to use prose in a thoroughly lyrical, associative way. *Gilead* also shares with Emerson’s essays that delight in surprise—the fact that the reader does not know where the narrator is going next. In “Experience” Emerson writes, “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads; and as we pass through them they prove to be many colored lenses, which paint the world their own hue,

and each shows us only what lies in its own focus” (288). The “train of moods” that is John Ames’ subjectivity is the emotional current that binds *Gilead*’s loose fragments into coherence.

One of the consequences of structuring *Gilead* in this way is its peculiar sense of time. The pacing of the book is slow, extremely slow, at times almost static. James Wood called this *Gilead*’s “processional pace” (“Acts of Devotion” 31). There is little hurry because there is little plot, and this allows for the book’s extraordinary rendering of dailiness, the felt experience of quotidian life. It’s this slackening of time that welcomes contemplation. The year is slow because it reflects the theme. The life of a pensive elderly man in a small Midwestern town is going to be experienced, temporally speaking, as slow. Laura Tanner has connected the novel’s slow pacing and the intensity of its focus to its “powerful unveiling of how dying shapes the sensory and psychological dynamics of human perception” (227). The lived experience of dying, according to Tanner, literally slows the experience of time, and she quotes Jean Amery’s *On Aging* and neuroscientists to support her claim. The slowness also fits one of the moral purposes of the book, which is to ask readers to put down the smart phone, sidestep the information avalanche of contemporary U.S. culture, and simply perceive the world around them like John Ames does. To the frenzied speed of the digital age Robinson says, slow down. To the Internet’s fracturing of reality and endless distractions Robinson says, focus. Look at people’s faces and trees and the moon and admire the miraculous and mysterious fact of them. This may be why Robinson sets the book in the 1950s, when the culture was on the cusp of being transformed by mass media, symbolized by the entrance of the television into the Ames’ home. TV is more than a radio-replacement, as Ames thinks. It is an entirely new way to experience time, and the speed of the culture has only increased since. Robinson opposes the speed of modernity, slowing the reader down as a kind of simulated respite from the U.S. culture of

distraction, allowing a space for deep focus, contemplation, and moral imagination, the humanist values Robinson implicitly defends, perhaps because they are under particular strain in the Information Age.

Besides the effects of loosening narrative structure, the epistolary form also allows for a complex representation of human consciousness. Simply stated, the messy, fragmentary character of the structure is a metaphor for the messy, fragmentary character of conscious experience. For Robinson, fragmentation has none of the sense of “crisis” that it had for the modernists, nor does it have anything to do with the cracking-up of reality in an age of mass media. Robinson fragments her form because that’s how the individual subjective mind receives reality: one knows reality not in wholes but in parts. *Gilead*’s form mimics the mind, albeit a self-consciously representational model of the mind, since we are often made aware that the book is indeed written, thus formed and artificial, secondary to the actual workings of consciousness.

This is a very old idea of how the mind works, rooted in the empirical tradition and one of the mainstays of American literary culture. Like many aspects of Robinson’s work, it leads one back to New England. Jonathan Edwards, inspired by Lockean psychology, asserted an idea that the mind consists of images of reality. For Edwards this kind of deep subjectivism—that we have no access to reality except through images, essentially a metaphorical relationship to the real—was entirely compatible with Calvinist theology which claimed that the individual mind is linked to God through the perception of nature. Robinson calls this the “great truth of the centrality of human consciousness” (xiv *When*). The subjectivism that characterizes both of Robinson’s first two books is in line with the authors who were influenced by Edwards and the

legacy of New England Calvinist culture, from Dickinson to the Transcendentalists and on to Wallace Stevens.

One of the assumptions built into this idea of mind is that consciousness is not itself aware of its specific purpose or end. Its *telos* is hidden because it is immersed in time, in history. It is in this way an “open” structure, i.e., open to nameless possibility as opposed to a “closed” structure where the purpose, end, *telos* is already known. One of the most consistent polemics in Robinson’s essays is an attack against closed structures of thought. She is one of America’s great critics of reductionism in any form it takes, whether epistemological, metaphysical, or political. However, she differs from other contemporary critics of reductionism like Thomas Pynchon or Toni Morrison because Robinson’s critique is essentially informed by religion and not politics. This probably strikes some people as odd, because isn’t religion the very paragon of a reductionism? Not for Robinson’s non-dogmatic, liberal version of religion. Christianity for her accepts change, affirms process, and accounts for uncertainty:

I am not of the school of thought that finds adherence to doctrine synonymous with firmness of faith. On the contrary, I believe that faith in God is a liberation of thought, because thought is an ongoing instruction in things that pertain to God. To test this belief is my fictional practice, the basis for the style and substance of my two novels and the motive behind my nonfiction. This might seem to some people to be paradoxical, a religious belief in intellectual openness. (“Credo” 26-27)

She defends her “religious belief in intellectual openness” with a quote from Wallace Stevens about “the mind in the act of finding what will suffice,” a line which affirms process: what is truly valuable about the mind and about the self is not what is “found” but “the act of finding” itself.

The stakes for Robinson in defending openness are large, since the possibilities for the self are defined and limited by the language the culture offers about the self. The smaller the language, the smaller the self and vice versa. Robinson sees the modern imagination as offering small, sometimes radically reductionist ideas about the self. Her basic complaint is summed up in “Freedom of Thought”: “There is a tendency to fit a tight and awkward carapace of definition over humankind, and to try to trim the living creature to fit the dead shell” (7). This sentiment is reflected in her critique of the New Atheists and evolutionary psychologists in her essays in *Absence of Mind*, namely that they offer closed models of thought and human identity.

She rejects closure entirely, opting instead for a view of the real that accounts for complexity and uncertainty. “Unknowability is the first thing about reality that must be acknowledged” (54). This acknowledgment leads to openness. “So long as the human exists to impose itself on reality, as it has already done so profoundly, what it is and what we are must remain an open question” (131). The words “open” and “openness” always have a positive valence in Robinson’s writing. The only time she moves out of a negative critique and asserts an alternative to the “modernist” or “positivist” thinkers in *Absence of Mind* is to approvingly quote William James’ “open epistemology” which uses “the kind of language available to psychology before the positivist purge, appealing to experience, to subjectivity” (53). This open view of reality and human identity also applies to politics. She wants a democratic politics that is “wholly open in that it anticipates and welcomes the disruption of present values in the course of finding truer ones” (xiv). The form she chose for *Gilead* asserts the value of open over closed forms in order to properly frame her view of consciousness and human identity.

Gilead places a high value on process, of the mind groping for sense while plunged into an uncertain, unfolding present. If Ames simply used the letter to Robbie to tell the story of the

abolitionist grandfather, the novel would be closed in the sense that the grandfather's life and fate are completely known. But he doesn't simply tell that story—he also reports the present. And what gives *Gilead* its open form is this unfolding of the present, the roll of time opening onto possibility and contingency; all the while the mind struggles to truly know where the present will lead. Neither Ames nor the reader knows how the story will end. In fact, even at the end we are uncertain, since Ames' death is not dramatized but is simply suggested as his writing ceases. Other uncertainties arise, such as the purpose of his letter. He asks, "What should I record for you?" and, "What else should I tell you?" (9). Even his intentions for writing the letter are uncertain. By the end the purpose has stabilized, but only to a degree. "I think I'll put an end to all this writing. I've read it over, more or less, and I've found some things of interest in it, mainly the way I have been drawn back into this world in the course of it" (238). So perhaps his initial intention was to escape the world and the pain of facing extinction, and the letter had the ironic effect of pulling him back into the world. But this is just speculation. His own intentions elude him, and this leaves everything open to further interpretation and the recovery of hidden meanings. By opening Ames' letter onto the present, the reader is allowed to experience Ames' consciousness in the act of finding, finding his intention, finding the meaning of memories and experiences. *Gilead*'s process-based narrative embodies the idea of the "mind in the act of finding what will suffice."

The other way Robinson embeds complexity into her representation of human consciousness is by making Ames a writer, allowing for a high degree of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity to enter the text. As in so much of contemporary fiction, the reader is made constantly aware that what she is reading is constructed, artificial. Ames, as a Congregationalist minister, has done a lot of writing over the years. "Say, fifty sermons a year for forty-five years,

not counting funerals and so on, of which there have been a great many. Two thousand two hundred and fifty. If they average thirty pages, that's sixty-seven thousand five hundred pages" (19). This background in writing and rhetoric informs the letter to his son, and he approaches the task with a degree of self-consciousness only available to experienced writers. As a writer, he knows he is presenting an interpretation of his self to his son, a shadow self, not his essence. This affects his rhetoric, since he wants, above all, for his son to remember him in a positive light. The self he conjures changes depending on the social context:

I don't write the way I speak. I'm afraid you would think I didn't know any better. I don't write the way I do for the pulpit, either, insofar as I can help it. That would be ridiculous, in the circumstances. I do try to write the way I think. But of course that all changes as soon as I put it into words. And the more it does seem to be my thinking, the more pulpitish it sounds, which I guess is inevitable. (28-29)

He also knows that he is presenting a version of the truth to his son that is subject to further reflection and revision. Just as the mind re-circulates and reinterprets memories, we often find Ames reflecting on what he has written and offering reinterpretations:

Looking back over what I have written, it seems to me I've described my grandfather in his old age as if he were simply an eccentric, and as if we tolerated him and were respectful of him and love him and he loved us. And all that is true. But I believe we knew also that his eccentricities were thwarted passion, that he was full of anger, at us not least, and that the tremors of his old age were in some part the tremors of pent grief. (34)

For Ames writing is revision, interpretation is reinterpretation. The ability of the mind to observe and critique itself is, for Robinson, an important characteristic about consciousness often omitted from materialist descriptions. In *Absence of Mind* she affirms that "we do indeed

continuously stand apart from ourselves, appraising. Every higher act of the mind, intellectual, aesthetic, or moral, is, paradoxically, also an exercise in self-doubt, self-scrutiny” (116). This certainly applies to Ames who writes simultaneously for his son and himself, a letter and a journal. “I realize that for some time I have mainly been worrying to myself, when my intention from the beginning was to speak to you” (202). The degree of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity in *Gilead* offers a highly complex view of consciousness and identity, which if considered seriously should disturb a popular view of Robinson as a writer of naïve, outmoded, nineteenth-century realism.

As epistolary form affects the book’s structure and its view of the mind, it also produces its unique tone. Letters, especially letters of a personal nature, are among the most intimate forms of discourse. As biographers know, letters between friends or close relations carry hints of self-disclosure usually hidden in other forms of public address. Perhaps the only form of discourse more intimate is the diary or journal, where the self addresses itself. And at times it seems as if Ames is using the letter as a form of journal, especially when thinking through his relationship to Jack. *Gilead*’s epistle suggests a tone of quietly sustained confidence, producing a powerful connection between the narrative voice and the reader, as if we are listening to a secret unintended for us. The realization of subjective closeness is one of the values Robinson promotes in her fiction. It is an intimacy rooted in Protestantism, echoing through Puritan diaries and Emily Dickinson poems. And it is in deep opposition to a trend or tendency in contemporary fiction whereby writers view their characters from a great, ironic height. The contrast between O’Connor’s Catholicism and Robinson’s Protestantism is nowhere clearer than in the development of tone. O’Connor’s deadpan irony is tonally opposite from Robinson’s intimate seriousness. Though Ames says he has problems controlling his anger—“A little too much

anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine” (6)—the anger never makes an appearance in the tone. While there are careful modulations, gratitude and joy downshift into minor frustration, the tone hovers near a mild center, avoiding anything wild or ecstatic for a steady, almost stoical tone, the timbre one would expect from a mostly contented older man with a belief in God’s sovereignty. The effect on the reader is soothing, it draws us in.

The priority of tone in *Gilead* stems from the priority of voice in revealing character. For Robinson, voice is character and character is voice. Or, put differently, voice is the essential mark of identity. And this applies equally well to *Gilead*, *Housekeeping*, and the three voices of *Home*. One might ask, Why does Robinson prefer voice to reveal character rather than behavior as in traditional realism? There are several reasons. For one, she aligns her work with an American vernacular tradition which has always relied on voice to produce character. The best example of this is Huck’s voice in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Encoded into the vernacular tradition is the sense that voices register, through tone and dialect, specific regional cultures. Ruth’s voice is a voice of the Far West, while Ames’ voice is Middle Western. Of John Ames’ voice Robinson says, “I found that a voice presented itself to me, which was theological and Iowan” (Hoezee). While Ames’ voice is both theological and Iowan, Robinson sites another source for his voice:

While I was writing *Gilead* I was reading Charles Sanders Peirce...he has this wonderfully elegant, unpretentious, philosophical voice that doesn’t sound like anyone else. It’s as if he can take on questions of any scale without the slightest bit of self-consciousness about doing it... it seemed to me as if reading him fed...John Ames (“Conversations: Marilynne Robinson”).

It is telling that Robinson was attracted to the un-ironic and un-self-conscious quality in Peirce's voice, for that is exactly a feature of Ames' voice which marked *Gilead* as emerging from an entirely different cultural source than the hyper-self-conscious and self-aware tradition that stems from modernism and continues through the post-modernisms of Vladimir Nabokov, John Barth, and David Foster Wallace.

Another reason for the value of voice is that it's a powerful index of individuation. Each person's habits of speech reveal the fundamentally different relationship each individual has with language. And a different relationship with language signifies a different relationship to reality and to others. To make human identity synonymous with voice is to make a claim for the absolute uniqueness and exceptionalism of human subjectivity. There is no stronger evidence for Robinson's absolute commitment to individualism—that each individual is utterly different from every other individual, and the mark of this, in terms of literary conventions, is voice. This commitment to an individualistic relationship with reality (as mediated by language) is central to Robinson's aesthetic of the voice, just as it was for many of her favorite writers, such as Dickinson, Emerson, and Wallace Stevens, all of whom were embedded in a Protestant-Calvinist culture which valued individualism and inwardness.

Gilead is both a continuation of and a departure from *Housekeeping*'s style. The shift in style is due primarily to the change in narrator. Ruth and Ames are very different characters, and in a certain sense a character's style, her voice, is her character. As Robinson says, "In my fiction I try to be faithful to the voice of the narrator. That accounts more than anything for the difference between *Housekeeping* and *Gilead* in terms of language" (Hoezee). Ruth's metaphors, her digressive, meditative sentences, and her chant-like repetitions are refashioned for new purposes.

Several of these tendencies find their way into *Gilead*. Like Ruth Stone, John Ames is an Emersonian who cannot resist the habit of making metaphors:

The moon looks wonderful in this warm evening light, just as a candle flame looks beautiful in the light of morning. Light within light. It seems like a metaphor for something. So much does. Ralph Waldo Emerson is excellent on this point. It seems to me to be a metaphor for the human soul, the singular light within the great general light of existence. Or it seems like poetry within language. Perhaps wisdom within experience. Or marriage within friendship and love. I'll try to remember to use this.

(119)

As with Emerson, one metaphor is never enough, and in this passage we see Ames using one of Emerson and Wallace Stevens' favorite words, "or," to form new possibilities for meaning. Interestingly, Ames is quite self-conscious about this habit of making metaphors, announcing that the light within light "seems like a metaphor for something." The word "metaphor" never occurs in *Housekeeping*. The implication is that Ames knows he is using the artifice of metaphor to construct meaning, and because of the confessional genre the reader is given access to the process by which meaning is made and unmade. Finally, unlike Ruth, making metaphor is not simply for Ames' own understanding of the world. He wants to put his metaphors to practical use. "I believe I see a place for [these metaphors] in my thoughts on Hagar and Ishmael. Their time in the wilderness seems like a specific moment of divine Providence within the whole providential regime of Creation" (119). Because of Ames' public role as minister, his metaphors are placed into his sermons, which are then put to use in illuminating Biblical narrative.

Despite the persistent habit of making metaphors, *Gilead* does present a more restrained and austere literary style than *Housekeeping*, as evidenced in this passage of natural description:

As I was walking up to the church this morning, I passed that row of big oaks by the war memorial—if you remember them—and I thought of another morning, fall a year or two ago, when they were dropping their acorns thick as hail almost. There was all sorts of thrashing in the leaves and there were acorns hitting the pavement so hard they'd fly past my head. All this in the dark, of course. I remember a slice of moon, no more than that. It was a very clear night, or morning, very still, and then there was such energy in the things transpiring among those trees, like a storm, like travail. I stood there a little out of range, and I thought, It is all still new to me. I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me. (57)

Gilead still exhibits a reverence toward nature and natural forces, but it is more restrained in its energy and its description. Robinson also tends to avoid adjectives and specific or scientific names for nouns. The lyricism and musicality of the prose is downplayed. Alliteration and word repetition mostly fall away. The archaic words are replaced by plainer, more colloquial diction. Ruth's ecstatic revelations become Ames' patient meditations.

The result is a sometimes radically pared down language: "Trees sound different at night, and they smell different, too" (71). We don't know what kinds of trees these are or what they sound or smell like, but one senses Ames' gratitude and wonder toward them. This plain style is a deliberate reduction of the potentialities of language, lending the novel a more elemental quality. Paradoxically, Robinson's minimal style is intended to lend greater weight and meaning and value to existence itself. By stripping away the non-essential elements of prose such as the decorative, the ornamental, the baroque, and the archaic, by essentially affirming the "prosaic" in "prose," Robinson manages to suggest the opposite: the beauty of existence.

One of the main sources of *Gilead*'s style is the aesthetics of the Reformed Protestant tradition. In the way that *Housekeeping*'s style owes much to the American Romantics, *Gilead*'s style is indebted to Calvinism. Calvinism, of course, carries with it a notoriously anti-aesthetic tradition. The "iconoclast" mobs of the Reformation were inspired by the Zwingli-Calvinist interpretation of the Decalogs ban on "graven images" to destroy Catholic religious icons and statues. The Congregationalist denomination, to which John Ames and Robinson herself belong, remain deeply suspicious of ornamentation and imagery; and this is reflected in the plain, undecorated facades of their churches. *Gilead* is the prose equivalent of a Congregationalist church, so barren of iconography and decoration that it even excludes the cross, a stark reductionism intended to suggest its aesthetic opposite: the beauty of God.

History, Memory, and Typological Imagination

Since John Ames is 77 years old, diagnosed with a fatal disease, he does not have much to look forward to in his mortal life. He thinks about heaven from time to time, but without much success. "I don't why I should expect to have any idea of heaven. I could never have imagined this world if I hadn't spent almost eight decades walking around it" (66). Robinson's decision to narrate *Gilead* from the perspective of old age means that death's shadow haunts every page. It also gives the entire novel a retrospective orientation. Rather than Ruth's precarious bridge crossing into an unknowable future, Ames is timid about the present and future, preferring to spend a large portion of his letter to his son on the past, lending him entrance into the memories, historical events, and legends that have shaped Ames and the people and places around him.

The concern with the past is not anything new for Robinson. Her dissertation on Shakespeare shows a scholar's delight in Renaissance history and culture. In *Mother Country* she included an extended and idiosyncratic social history of modern Britain. Many of *The Death of Adam* essays involve interventions into modern cultural and intellectual history, including such topics as Darwinism, nineteenth-century American education, and the ill-effects of Max Weber on contemporary attitudes toward the Puritans. More recently in *When I Was a Child I Read Books* she has written about the Cold War, the history of American law, and American liberalism. She has written so much about history she has even developed an ideology of her historical methodology:

I often look at primary texts, books generally acknowledged to have had formative impact, because they are a standard against which other things can be judged....If the primary text itself departs too far from the character common wisdom and specialist wisdom (these are typically indistinguishable) have ascribed to it, then clearly some rethinking is in order (2)

Although her historical methods have come under scrutiny, particularly with regard to *Mother Country*, she brings a historians consciousness to the act of fiction writing.

This intellectual habit of historical thinking is a product of her training as a Renaissance scholar at the University of Washington and it is also symptomatic of her liberal Protestant identity. One of the most important differences between the so-called Evangelical-liberal divide in contemporary Protestantism concerns the status of history. Generally speaking, liberal Protestants have accepted the Enlightenment idea that humans are historical creatures, products of their social pasts, whereas Evangelicals prefer a more ahistorical, metaphysical view of human nature. This assumption has a profound effect on their differing views of Biblical interpretation.

Conservative Evangelicals typically read the Bible “literally,” that is to say, without explicit reference to the context of Ancient Near Eastern cultures and societies. The liberal approach has been more accommodating of modern Biblical scholarship, viewing Scripture as a product of various historical and political forces, but no less valuable for it. Robinson falls squarely on the liberal-Enlightenment side of this dynamic, and her essays and *Gilead* stand as testaments to her belief in the shaping power of history in human life and the interpretation of the past.

However, this should not suggest that Robinson is devoted to any kind of “liberal orthodoxy.” In fact, she has been a great critic of the liberal Protestant tradition throughout her essays, using her historical consciousness to critique hubristic liberal attitudes about the irrelevance of the past. In “The Fate of Ideas: Moses,” she offers a thorough critique of the debunking attitude she finds in contemporary Biblical scholarship on the Hebrew Bible:

Source criticism, which has given us J, E, D, P, and other such artifacts of learned speculation, was pioneered by Julius Wellhausen in the middle of the nineteenth century. This analytical method is so perfectly suited to conforming the text to the critic’s assumptions about it that it establishes nothing. Yet it has profoundly conditioned the reading of the Bible, which is now assumed by many to have been patched and botched and redacted until its intelligibility is at best merely apparent. It is refreshing to see attention drawn to the extremely tenuous nature of so much of the seeming learnedness that cumber writing about the Bible. (118)

Robinson is both a product and critic of liberal historical consciousness. If anything she wants to inspire a deeply historical sense of the present so that we might be more generous toward ourselves and so extend that generosity to the events and texts of the past. It is Robinson’s profound love of the past, ancient texts and long-dead theologians, that motivates much of her

historical inquiries. She carries with her that humanist desire to preserve for future generations the past's value and beauty.

Within the context of post-war American literature, Robinson is not alone in her historical turn of mind. She is part of a broad trend in fiction, which includes such authors as Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and E.L. Doctorow, who use the novel to revise historical understanding. In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon coined the terms “historiographic metafiction” to describe many of these literary texts that assert an interpretation of the past and are also self-reflexive, that is, critical of their own version of the truth as being partial or incomplete. While Robinson would disagree with the assumption of many practitioners of historiographic metafiction, namely that when it comes to history there are no facts only interpretations, she agrees that historical understanding can only be partial or incomplete. “The true past is veiled in mystery, to the extent that it can be said to exist at all” (*Death* 126). In *Gilead*, Robinson practices her version of this widespread literary impulse by revisiting the clash between free-state and slave-state advocates leading up to the Civil War in order to revise our historical understanding of American abolitionism.

The American abolitionists embody for Robinson many of her core values: religious conviction, political reform, and moral courage. Of course, abolitionism was a highly complex social phenomenon, with manifold factions and competing ideologies. What Robinson wants to preserve is their example of the kind of visionary, prophetic conviction that is missing from today's politics. In writing about the abolitionist Charles Finney, Robinson says

we have no equivalent figure now, though during his lifetime there were many revivalists who were also educators, highly cultured men committed to radical social reform—reform for them meaning legal, political, and social liberation. It would be difficult

indeed to reckon the debt we owe them, both as individuals and as a culture, and just as difficult to imagine what America might have become, or remained, without their efforts and their influence. Our debt to them would be far greater and our society far healthier if the causes to which they devoted their lives had taken better root (171).

For Robinson, “abolitionism foresaw a reform of the whole of society” (136). But critics of abolitionism have maligned this radical tradition: “The inevitability of the association of abolitionism with sick and devious motives and with hypocrisy is very nearly absolute” (178). Robinson weaves abolitionism into *Gilead* as if to reintroduce it to the American public.

As *Gilead*'s sentences move the narrative along, they eventually settle into distinct pools of memory, and these memories Ames returns to over and over again to plumb for their meaning, which he can never quite exhaust. This repetitive structure, the assertion of memory and then the return to memory, creates a kind of narrative layering. Here is the memory of Ames' father feeding him the ashy biscuit:

I remember that day in my childhood when I lay under the wagon with the other little children, watching them pull down the ruins of that Baptist church, and my father brought me a piece of biscuit for my lunch, and I crawled out and knelt with him there, in the rain. I remember it as if he broke the break and put a bit of it in my mouth, though I know he didn't. His hands and his face were black with ash—he looked charred, like one of the old martyrs—and he knelt there in the rain and brought a piece of biscuit out from the inside of his shirt, and he did break it, that's true, and gave half to me and at the other half himself. (102)

Although the memory is recalled in vivid, physical detail, it is also a flawed memory, since Ames mis-remembers his father placing the biscuit in his mouth, a gesture recalling the Catholic

Eucharist. Clearly it is a moment that resembles the Christian sacrament of communion, but it is not interpreted here, only asserted as significant. A few pages later we read: “I remember that old Baptist church that my father helped to pull down, all black in the rain, looking ten times as formidable as it would have before the lightning struck... That biscuit ashy from my father’s charred hand. It all means more than I can tell you” (114). The repetition of the scene deepens the mystery of what transpired between father and son. It also builds a resonance with other parts of the text, such as this scene in the church:

When almost everyone had left and the elements were still on the table and the candles still burning, your mother brought you up the aisle to me and said, “You ought to give him some of that.” You’re too young, of course, but she was completely right. Body of Christ, broken for you. Blood of Christ, shed for you. Your solemn and beautiful child face lifted up to receive these mysteries at my hands. (70)

This repetition of communion from his father to Ames, from Ames to Robbie, resembles a kind of typology which collapses difference and sustains the same structure and pattern. *Gilead* works through amplification of imagery, through a technique of layering, increasing the complexity and density of images. It has a vertical rather than horizontal movement, a stacking of images rather than the linearity of plot. Robinson is always careful not to close down meaning but open it up, since an event remembered always “means more than I can tell you.” Of course, this is reminiscent of layering of imagery in *Housekeeping*. It can ultimately be traced back to the typological imagination found in *Moby Dick* and further back in Puritan sermons and metaphysics.

Gilead moves forward on ever-shifting tide of emotion, looping back to recall memories again and again, and through this process the book’s overall structure takes the shape of a

comedy. It can also be understood as expressing the structure of comedy, since *Gilead* begins with a series of negative emotions—death, regret, and guilt—building to an even deeper negativity when we learn of the death of Ames’ first wife and daughter, and the “dark years” spent before meeting Lila. In the sadness of Gilead’s first half, Robinson seems to be preparing us for a repeat of *Housekeeping*’s meditation on loss. But *Gilead* turns at the end in an act of forgiveness, and Ames acquires a qualified sense of peace about his life, his work, and the loss of his family. It is this comedic structure, in the sense of moving from disorder to order, that makes *Gilead* more overtly Christian than *Housekeeping*, since there is no such thing as a Christian tragedy. Dante wrote the *Commedia* and Milton insists on the *felix culpa*. Ames will die and then he will “be with the Good Lord.” There is certainly an elegiac tone running throughout the text, but *Gilead* never verges toward the tragic, remaining essentially comedic.

The Cultural Challenge of John Ames

John Ames is an extension of Robinson’s aesthetic and stylistic idiosyncrasy. He is the book’s great achievement, and the human warmth, tenderness, and generosity of his voice is perhaps uniquely responsible for why the novel attracted so many readers. Ames’ narrative journey is also compelling, from his initial fears and suffering to self-transformation through forgiveness to a qualified peace with death at the end. Through Ames, *Gilead* exhibits a kind of tough-minded hope that is uncommonly redemptive. Despite the bleak realities of loss, death, injustice, and misunderstanding, Robinson endorses the realities of possibility and change, which reflect the ever-present influence of frontier optimism and Christian hope. While Ames’ narrative yields certain universal significance, more local meanings arise when Ames is considered within a contemporary U.S. cultural and literary context. Ames is not only an

indelible literary creation, he is also a site where a variety of cultural meanings are asserted and contested.

The first is sympathy. John Ames is rare kind of character in contemporary fiction insofar as he is, for most part, virtuous. He is a man of integrity, trying to do “good,” and easily worthy of respect. The tender quality of his first-person voice encourages the reader to sympathize and identify with Ames. And in encouraging this relationship between narrator and reader, Robinson runs a considerable risk of criticism by those influenced by modernist aesthetics. James Wood writes, “Robinson's pastor is that most difficult narrator from a novelist's point of view, a truly good and virtuous man, and occasionally you may wish he possessed a bit more malice, avarice or lust—or just an intriguing unreliability” (“Acts of Devotion” 31). While Wood’s underestimates the degree to which *Gilead* is “unreliably” narrated, Robinson’s presentation of John Ames is countercultural in the sense that the culture at present is far more comfortable with ironic narratives which center on villains or anti-heroes.

The idea that John Ames might be too “good” speaks to literary culture in which Robinson writes, a literary culture still dominated by irony. Irony encourages a distance between character and reader, and this is usually accomplished by making characters who repel readers either because they lack innocence, are morally or politically repellent, or are grotesque, cartoonish, or comic. The ironist writer wants to move readers so far away from the character that they can assess the narrative from a disinterested perspective, thus arriving at an “aesthetic” truth about the character, a kind of “objective” knowledge that is impossible to arrive at if the reader identifies with and is emotionally invested in the character. Since the advent of modernist irony, there is a skepticism leveled at authors who encourage sympathetic identification, since this is viewed as a “lower” form of narrative art, akin to popular narrative like melodrama.

Robinson takes this chance, encouraging sympathy over irony. She risks repelling more “sophisticated” readers with modernist sensibilities who might find her book naïve and sentimental. But she gains readers (and viewers) of traditional narrative who might find in her book a beauty and depth and seriousness missing in most popular narrative. Very few literary writers today are willing to risk seeming sentimental out of fear that they will not be taken seriously, that they will be perceived as less “literary.” Robinson shows in *Gilead* how sympathetic identification can be handled, perhaps pointing to a way past the dominance of irony in contemporary literary culture.

Because there is sympathy between the reader and Ames, Robinson allows herself to do some indirect moralizing, yet another *faux pas* from a modernist perspective. Modernist aesthetics were founded against any kind of moralizing or didactic tendencies. The artist’s job is simply to present the subject as objectively as possible and the reader can understand the subject however he chooses. Robinson writes against this amoral, anti-didactic, modernist tendency. Many passages in *Gilead* read like brief homilies, and it becomes difficult to remember that the “you” is Ames’ son and not the reader. “Avoid transgression. How’s that for advice” (122). Usually Ames adds a touch of irony by saying “that’s the pulpit speaking,” yet he continues to mount the pulpit again and again. “I believe there are visions that come to us only in memory, in retrospect. That’s the pulpit speaking, but it’s telling the truth” (91). Other passages combine Ames’ theological intellectualism with the homily’s moral exhortation:

Theologians talk about a prevenient grace that precedes grace itself and allows us to accept it. I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave—that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And

therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying exactly the same thing. But that is the pulpit speaking. (246)

The pulpit speaks often in *Gilead*, and it is this mode of homily that is perhaps most disturbing to contemporary sensibilities. In having Ames tell his son how to live, Robinson is telling her readers how to live. She makes an indirect claim to moral authority. It is possible to interpret the decision to write the book from a first-person male perspective as a subversive use of the convention of patriarchal authority in order to establish Robinson's own female moral authority.

It is also true that Robinson does not encourage an easy sympathy with Ames, and she would no doubt take issue with any critic who claimed Ames was simply a "good man." Ames himself discourages Robbie and the reader from believing that fiction. We learn of Ames' moral flaws, his tendency toward anger ("If there was one thing I should have learned from them and did not learn, it was to control my temper"), his frustration toward his father ("How could I accept the advice of someone who had such a low estimation of me?"), his fear and anxiety about Jack Boughton (6, 234).⁵ We also know that Ames is not an entirely reliable narrator, especially after reading *Home*, when many of his perceptions are revealed to be wrong. He admits his dishonesty: "I was thinking about the frustrations and the disappointments of life, of which there are a very great many. I haven't been entirely honest with you about that" (236). All of these flaws are easily forgiven by contemporary readers. But it is really Ames' political blindness about race relations that truly complicates our sympathies.

The burning of Gilead's "Negro church" is a minor detail in Ames' tale. When Jack mentions the fire Ames replies, "That was a little nuisance fire, and it happened many years

ago,” to which Jack says, ““And it has been many years since there was a Negro church”” (231). The historical irony is clear: A town founded as an abolitionist stronghold is in 1956 a place so racist that the entire African American community has fled. Ames is a man—a white man—of his time and place, blind to the ironies of race relations, “surprised” by miscegenation (217). Although he is living during a time of great change in attitudes about race, within two years of *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka*, he has no urgency and no conviction regarding the injustice of racial inequality. Ames seems to be aware of what one critic called his “prophetic failure” (Mensch 229):

I woke up this morning thinking this town might as well be standing on the absolute floor of hell for all the truth there is in it, and the fault is mine as much as anyone It seems to me now we never looked up from the trouble we had just getting by to put the obvious question, that is, to ask what it was the Lord was trying to make us understand. The word ‘preacher’ comes from an old French word, *prédicateur*, which means prophet. And what is the purpose of a prophet except to find meaning in trouble? (228)

Ames’ failure to “find meaning in trouble” when it came to the burning of the Negro church, the African American exile from Gilead, and the larger national sin of racial segregation make for a difficult sympathy between Ames and the reader. It forces us into a relationship with Ames that mirrors the relationship between Ames and Jack in that we are asked by Robinson to forgive Ames his failure and fallibility, just as Ames forgives Jack’s failure and fallibility. *Gilead* enacts the kind of complicated sympathy that Robinson would like to inspire not only in literary art but also in the political community, the sense that because everyone is fallible wherever there is failure it ought to be forgiven.

The sources for this difficult sympathy are many. The first is political in that Robinson wants her narratives to reflect a democratic culture. This means that she does not write for an aesthetic elite but for the majority of literate people. The many rather than the few should be able to access the pleasures of her art, something she claims modernism rejected in its disdain for democracy. Based on *Gilead*'s popularity she has succeeded in introducing a large audience to her stark version of literary beauty, countering in whatever small degree to the "dumbing down" of American culture, one of her most frequent jeremiads. The second is religious, since the idea of modernist irony with its notion that a narrator ever could achieve a godlike, totally objective perspective cuts against her belief that humans are fallen and incapable of transcending history. Such a godlike perspective for Robinson is literally reserved for God. But perhaps the risk of John Ames has most to do with the habits of mind encouraged by ironic characterization. As readers are allowed to look condescendingly on an overtly foolish, grotesque, or immoral character they are encouraged to be disinterested and disengaged from other humans, a moral stance incompatible with Robinson's ethic of generosity and her metaphysical belief in the sanctity, dignity, and incomprehensible complexity of every human life. It is her humanism that finally underwrites *Gilead*'s sympathy. She writes to encourage humanistic attitudes which are opposed to the ironic, anti-humanist drift of contemporary culture. While much contemporary narrative encourages its consumers to take a position of distance or disdain toward people, resulting in a diminished and reductionist sense of the lives of others, Robinson encourages a radiant humanism which claims that nothing is more complicated and worthy of attention than the inner lives of ordinary people.

Religion is another aspect of Ames that Robinson uses to challenge her cultural moment. She took a major risk in centering her novel on a preacher, taking the risk of bringing an overtly

religious figure into a culture where religion is an exceptionally controversial and politically-charged discourse. Robinson vis-à-vis Ames challenges the conventional discourse on religion in three ways. Firstly, she challenges a trend within post-war American literature's representation of religious figures. Secondly, she challenges the secular cultural elite and its skepticism of religion. And thirdly, she challenges the Evangelical Right and its marriage of dogmatic religion and conservative politics. In each way John Ames is intended to unsettle dominant narratives about the role of religion in contemporary literature and society.

In terms of literary discourse, few serious post-war authors have placed religion in a positive light, while most have used religion to expose its ironies, dangers, and hypocrisies. A particularly violent example is Joyce Carol Oates's *Son of Morning* (1978) which features a Reverend so consumed with guilt over lust that he takes Jesus' advice literally and plucks out his right eye in front of the congregation. The negative treatment of religion and religious figures applies not only to secular authors openly critical of religion but also includes writers who profess faith like John Updike. In *Rabbit, Run* (1960), Updike portrays the minister Jack Eccles as morally impotent, a spiritual non-entity, in Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's downfall. Another pair of preachers appear in *A Month of Sundays* (1974), Tom Marshfield and Ed Parsley, both of whom are sexually depraved hypocrites. The novel ends with Parsley leaving his wife for a hippie/political radical and his life ends when he blows himself up trying to assemble a homemade bomb. In *Roger's Version* (1986), Dale Kohler, an idealistic evangelical, seeks to prove the existence of God with the aid of computer modeling, but in the end Dale abandons his quest when confronted with Professor Myron Kriegman's rational and convincing naturalistic description of the origins of life. Throughout his long career, Updike's work registers the ironies of religious professions and the crisis and drama of the loss of religious belief. But he found it

difficult to make a positive, un-ironic claim for the value of religious language, thought, and belief in contemporary culture.

The same is true for another religious author, Flannery O'Connor. Although O'Connor was a serious Catholic, her fictional portrayals of religious characters are ironic and satirical, mainly grotesque caricatures of evangelical southerners. There is the bigoted grandmother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and the corrupt Bible salesman in "Good Country People." While these characters can be read through O'Connor's Catholic understanding of sin and grace—essentially indicting the characters and the readers as bigoted violent frauds in need of redemption—her ironic portrayals are easily mistaken for a view of religious people as ignorant, ridiculous, even dangerous, and certainly not anything to respect or take seriously. For a secular audience unaware of O'Connor's Catholic intentions her work amounts to a confirmation of their worst suspicions of religion. Robinson is critical of O'Connor on this point. She says, "For some reason it is not conventional for serious fiction to treat religious thought respectfully—the influence of Flannery O'Connor has been particularly destructive, I think, though she is considered a religious writer, and she considered herself one" ("A World of Beautiful Souls"). The repetition of the word "considered" embodies a serious criticism of O'Connor's status as a "religious writer," just as it defines what Robinson believes is one of the duties of a serious, religious novelist: "to treat religious thought respectfully."

Douglas Walrath in his book *Displacing the Divine* on ministers in American fiction agrees with Robinson and locates the problem of treating religion respectfully to a shift within American culture:

Within the more sophisticated, diverse, and secular cultural context that developed during the 1960s and 1970s...the plausibility of Christian belief was not something that even

popular writers could take for granted. Beginning in the 1970s, Americans in general were less certain that the *typical* minister was an upright character and unquestioning believer than they were during the 1940s and 1950s. Simply presenting a hero minister whose own experience testified to the reality and efficacy of Christian faith was no longer sufficient to move sophisticated readers of popular fiction to suspend their disbelief... Popular novelists still created fictional ministers they hoped would seem like real humans to their readers. But to make their fictional divines credible, writers now found it necessary to create entire imaginary worlds where the Christian paradigm was still in place, and then to convince their readers that these imagined worlds mirrored the real world. (285)

This helps explain why Robinson placed Ames in the 1950s, a time when Gilead's religious culture and Ames' faith would appear credible and believable to today's audience. Walrath praises *Gilead* not only for registering the complexity and tensions between belief and unbelief within a single family, but also for not slipping into nostalgia for a more idyllic past:

What gives Robinson's novel so much integrity is her clear recognition that neither Ames' faith nor Gilead is ideal. John Ames is a comic hero only in his season, not for all seasons. Readers may long to appropriate for themselves what appears to be an idyllic faith like Ames' and live in an idyllic place like Gilead, but Ames knows that, even in the 1950s, neither is idyllic; he and Gilead are already relics from another time. Gilead is clearly a world that was. It is not a world that others can join. (289)

By shaping a world prior the 1960s, Robinson is able to imagine an alternative, comic-heroic view of religion and religious vocations. John Ames is her answer to the many novelists who are hostile to religion, to religious novelists like John Updike who emphasize the decline and loss of

religion, and to O'Connor who, in Robinson's opinion, demeans and diminishes religion through caricature, satire, and irony. Ames' humanity, thoughtfulness, and respectability are implicitly critiques of these tendencies within literary discourse.

Outside of literature, Robinson wrote for a culture deeply conflicted about the public role of religion. This is an anxiety as old as the country itself, but it became particularly heightened in the late 1970s when Iran underwent its Islamic Revolution and in America Jerry Fallwell founded the Moral Majority. The attacks on September 11th added to an intensification of the already existing anxieties about religion and politics, and one popular narrative regarding the origins of the attacks was the idea that religion was the sole source and cause for the attacks. Adding to this widely spread anti-religious narrative was the revelation in 2002 of the Catholic Church's child sex abuse scandal. These events, combined with the polarizing moral rhetoric of the Evangelical Right, have resulted in a nation that is conflicted and divided over religion like never before.

This cultural conflict was not lost on the writers dubbed the "New Atheists." After 9/11 there was a rekindling of rationalist discourse represented by authors such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. What they offered was a rational defense of atheism along with a moral critique of religion, which concluded, to quote Hitchens' book's subtitle, that "religion poisons everything." Based solely on the amount of books these authors sold, the public appetite for rationalist discourse ran strong after 9/11. The New Atheists promoted a swift intellectual response from thinkers questioning the metaphysical confidence and the liberal politics underlying their rationalist claims, including Terry Eagleton's *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2010) and Robinson's own *Absence of Mind* (2010).

Once we situate *Gilead* within this cultural context, the tension between the secular and religious reads as a response to the anxiety which surrounded religion at that time, a kind of negotiation between religious fundamentalists on one side and rationalist atheists on the other. With the voice of John Ames, Robinson attempted to inject a different religious tone into culture, one that is rarely heard in the public sphere: a voice of calm generosity. This is identifiably a liberal Protestant religious tone. Ames, who is skeptical of Evangelical dogmatic orthodoxy and understands the complexity of the abolitionist legacy, might be seen as a symbol of a privileged form of religious identity, the only one truly compatible with the liberal ideals of individualism, freedom of conscience, and social and political life with people of other faiths or no faith at all. In *Gilead*, Robinson claims that the most compatible form of religious identity with liberal democracy is one that exchanges orthodoxy for mystery, closed dogma for open speculation, and one that ultimately affirms the tension between the secular and religious.

Although there is not any hard sociological evidence for who read *Gilead*, it does seem that Robinson was successful in bringing together readers from across the secular and religious divide. Churches across the country featured *Gilead* in their book clubs, while more secular readers gravitated to it for its critical acclaim and major literary awards. The identification with John Ames which the book encourages stands to disquiet both the hard Evangelical Right as Ames is too intellectual and not dogmatic enough, and the more secular literary audience as he's an intellectually and morally respectable clergyman and not an object of satire. *Gilead* brought together an unlikely readership from across the so-called Red State-Blue State divide. It is a novel which speaks to our moment with great urgency, as Americans attempt to build generous communities within the constraints and tensions of a secular age.

The philosopher Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age* (2007) offers a historical understanding of the secular-religious tension. Taylor defines a "secular age" as a historical moment in the West when Christianity became just one spiritual option among many others. This means it is impossible to practice religion today in the West without the simultaneous awareness that other people believe differently. Taylor's book is a revision of the standard "secularization thesis," where the processes of modernity inevitably produce the waning of religion. Taylor posits the coexistence of secular *and* religious possibilities, a historical condition that creates and sustains the secular-religious tension which we find in *Gilead*. Taylor is just one of the many recent theorists and philosophers, including Judith Butler, Cornel West, and Jürgen Habermas, who have begun to explore how religious and secular identities are socially constructed. This theme in recent intellectual life is often called "post-secularism." At the core of this project is an attempt to destabilize the Enlightenment's secular-religion divide. It is within this intellectual climate that *Gilead*'s value and relevance is even more apparent, as it attempts to hold the secular and religious in tension.

This tension is given its fullest treatment in the plot with Ames' brother Edward, the book's figure of the modern intellectual. After a precocious childhood, he leaves Gilead to study abroad in Germany, returning years later a committed atheist. His spiritual transformation is a disaster for the Ames family, and Edward is initially exiled from his family, only in the end to win them over to his side, leaving Gilead with his parents to the Gulf Coast, and abandoning Ames to Gilead. Although the Ames brothers grow apart, there is a moment after Edward returns from Germany where difference breaks down and transcendence seems possible. It is the moment when the two brothers play catch.

Throughout *Gilead*, baseball serves as an image of community, a secular space with the power to unify individuals across different identity markers. In another episode, Ames attends a baseball game with his grandfather to watch Bud Fowler, the earliest known African-American professional baseball player. While that episode focuses on the importance of baseball for race relations, the moment of Ames and Edward playing catch briefly unifies two characters with opposing views on religion. As they play, Robinson begins to complicate the neat opposition between them. She has Edward quote Psalm 133 as he pours water over his head in a kind of secular baptism. This throws the comfortable opposition between secularism and religion into question, and we are forced to ask, What do these identity categories really mean? How helpful are they for judging others' subjective experience? Can the difference between secular and religious identities ever really be known? Robinson introduces a hint of mystery, forcing Ames and the reader to question what we really know about Edward's inner life. Ames reflects, "I thought after that day we would sometimes be able to talk. That did not prove to be the case. All the same, after that day I did feel pretty much at ease about the state of his soul. Though of course I am not competent to judge" (64). The silence between the brothers and Ames' suspension of judgment suggests the inadequacy of the categories "atheist" and "Christian." Robinson uses baseball's power to form temporary communities to interrogate this opposition, ultimately questioning the stability and intelligibility of any such claim of identity.

Identity claims can apply to people as well as to texts, and it is this latter concern which Robinson addresses through the repeated allusions to Ludwig Feuerbach. In this case, Robinson takes a famous piece of secular discourse, Feuerbach's atheistic book, *The Essence of Christianity*, and shows how it yields to both secular and religious meanings. For Edward, Feuerbach's book marshals the end of his faith, while for Ames, Feuerbach results in a

strengthened faith. He tells his son, “Feuerbach is a famous atheist, but he is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world. Of course he thinks that religion could just stand out of the way and let joy exist pure and undisguised. That is his one error, and it is significant. But he is marvelous on the subject of joy, and also on its religious expressions” (24). The irony that *The Essence of Christianity* can actually strengthen Christian faith is augmented when Ames says he will pass along the book to his son: “I’m going to set aside that Feuerbach with the books I will ask your mother to be sure to save for you. I hope you will read it sometime. There is nothing alarming in it, to my mind” (27). However, in the end he changes his mind and decides to give it to his “spiritual son,” the skeptic Jack Boughton. At their bus station parting, instead of giving Jack a Bible or a book by Karl Barth, Ames brings “along *The Essence of Christianity*, which I had set on the table by the door, hoping I might have a chance to give it to him” (239). By emphasizing the irony of intention—that the book responsible for making an atheist of Karl Marx and much of the Western intelligentsia can also serve as an apology for the Christian faith—Robinson shows her skepticism toward the essentializing tendency to label a text either religious or secular. Is *The Essence of Christianity* a secular or religious text? According to *Gilead*, the answer depends entirely on its reception, which depends upon the subjectivity of the reader. The same is true of *Gilead* itself; it too is available to secular and religious meanings.

The secular-religious tension reaches its height with the return of Jack Boughton. Jack is the town’s ne’er-do-well, a petty criminal, alcoholic, and a child-abandoner. He is *Gilead*’s portrait of the Prodigal Son. With Jack, Robinson deepens and intensifies the tension that is introduced with Edward. Ames is confronted with another non-churchgoing atheist, but this time he cannot simply walk by in silence or play catch and leave. He has to confront Jack, whose full

name is John Ames Boughton. He has to reconcile with his spiritual “son.” After weeks of Ames’ moral tumult about Jack—moving swiftly between fear, anxiety, and pity—it is revealed that Jack is in Gilead to see if it would be a hospitable place for his family to live. He lives with an African-American woman, Della, and they have a son together, and Jack would like to move his family from St. Louis and start over again in Gilead.

Jack is eventually driven back to St. Louis after the racial realities of Gilead are apparent to him. The bus station parting between Ames and Jack is one of the most poignant and most ambiguous moments in *Gilead*. Ames decides he would like to bless Jack, and he puts his hand on his forehead and recites a benediction from Numbers. Then he adds, “Lord, bless John Ames Boughton, this beloved son and brother and husband and father” (241). Jack replies, “Thank you, Reverend,” but his “tone made me think that to him it might have seemed I had named everything I thought he no longer was, when that was absolutely the furthest thing from my meaning, the exact opposite of my meaning” (241-242). Did the blessing offend Jack? What was its significance for him? What does it mean to “bless” an atheist? Does it mean anything different taking place at a bus depot than a church? Prior to this moment Ames says, “I wish I could put my hand on his brow and calm away all the guilt and regret that is exaggerated or misplaced, or beyond rectification in the terms of this world. Then I could see what I’m actually dealing with” (201). Ames admits to wanting to save Jack from the guilt of his past, as if the palm of his hand contained the power of redemption. Reflecting on this desire he adds, “Theologically, that is a completely unacceptable notion. It just happened to cross my mind. I apologize for it” (201). For Ames, only Christ has the power to redeem, and the human usurpation of that power is a form of sinful pride. But does he, nevertheless, bring this desire to redeem to the blessing of Jack? We cannot know. It is another of the book’s mysteries. What

we do know is, like the men at the garage, like Edward, a community is broken. Jack boards the bus and leaves, and whether he has changed his belief in God we do not know. The secular-religious tension is sustained, silence ensues, and the community remains inhospitable to difference.

The notion that *Gilead* can be read as a straightforward polemic for religion, a kind of literary apologetics, is untenable. This will not work for several reasons, the strongest one being the moral complexity of *Gilead*'s world. There are violent, racist Christians and sympathetic, humane atheists. Furthermore, the book repeatedly expresses skepticism about the very attempt to "convert" anyone to Christianity, locating authority not in dogma but in religious experience. Reading *Gilead* like the *Screwtape Letters* simply will not work. Once we consider the wider frame of U.S. cultural and political history after the events of September 11, 2001, its representation of the secular-religious tension can be best read as a response to some of the most pressing anxieties in contemporary American culture and politics.

Gilead is not simply the record of a specific life in a specific place and time. It is also a record of perception. The minimal "plot" is often interrupted with brief, lovingly detailed descriptions of quotidian life. We see soap bubbles: "I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst" (9). Men working at a garage: "They're not churchgoing, either one of them, just decent rascally young fellows who have to be joking all the time, and there they were, propped against the garage wall in the sunshine, lighting up their cigarettes" (5). A cat: "Old Soapy was lying in the sun, plastered to the sidewalk" (52). And a child's hair: "There's a shimmer on a child's hair, in the sunlight. There are rainbow colors in it, tiny, soft beams of just the same colors you can see in the dew sometimes" (52). Far from being extraneous, digressive, or ornamental, the language of

perception is part of a strategy to correct what Robinson believes is excluded from scientific, or what she calls “parascientific,” descriptions of reality, namely the quality of felt experience. In *Absence of Mind* she addresses the idea that there is a sense of emptiness in the modern world.

She writes:

Assuming that there is indeed a modern malaise, one contributing factor might be the exclusion of the felt life of the mind from the accounts of reality proposed by the oddly authoritative and deeply influential parascientific literature that has long associated itself with intellectual progress, and the exclusion of felt life from the varieties of thought and art that reflect the influence of these accounts. (35)

Robinson goes much further than simply registering moments of felt life. She gives perception a kind of religious significance, the meaning of which can only be fully appreciated with reference to John Calvin.

In the fifth chapter of Calvin’s *Institutes* he writes, “Wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty, while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory” (59). Words of perception like “eyes” and “view” and the metaphor of the mirror appear frequently in Calvin’s writings. According to Calvin’s Reformed Protestantism, the Roman Catholic Church did not have the authority to harness the divine in the figure of the Pope or the Real Presence of the Eucharist. The result of this critique was a shift in the locus of the divine from the visible Church to the visible universe. Calvin considered the perception of the universe, especially the perception of beauty, a sacred communication between the individual and God. This is an aspect of Calvinism that Robinson deeply admires and attempts to embody in her fiction.

In her preface to a selection of Calvin's writings she says, "The beauty of what we see is burdened with truth. It signifies the power of God and his constant grace toward the human creature. It signifies the address of God to the individual human consciousness...For Calvin, there is great, continuous instruction in perception itself" (xxiii). This is because "Calvin is intensely this-worldly, in fact, and sees the task of the soul as deep perception of the givenness of this world rather than as looking through or beyond it" ("Calvinism as Metaphysics"). For Robinson, the allegorical religious consciousness, whereby nature is a screen for a hidden God, is opposed to Calvinist perception. So too is the mystic's inward, spiritual communion with God. For Robinson, the Calvinist experience of God is an outward, this-worldly experience of perception. In the essay on "Freedom of Thought," she invokes John Calvin's metaphor that "nature is a shining garment in which God is revealed and concealed" (76). The paradox of God revealed and concealed means that the perception of ordinary life—soap bubbles, a child's hair—is as sacred as anything that might lie beyond ordinary life. It is perception that sanctifies ordinary life for Robinson, supercharging the quotidian with holy significance. For Robinson, the "instruction" supplied by perception is vastly superior to the knowledge of intellectual cognition.

Robinson believes the high value placed on perception is a specifically American cultural inheritance. It stems from the Calvinist culture of the early Puritan settlers and was passed down as a habit of mind to the nineteenth-century New England writers such as Melville, Dickinson, and Whitman. She writes,

"They [Nineteenth-Century New England writers] struggled with their religious heritage as New England moved from its status as a self-protective refugee population to a people more at ease with the world. Yet there remains in all their work the ravishment, or the

shock, of revelatory perception, whether of the sea, or of a slant of light, or of the floods of humanity crossing on the Brooklyn ferry...Behind the aesthetics and the metaphysics of classical American literature, again and again we find the Calvinist soul, universal in its singularity, and full of Calvinist wonder” (xxvi-xxvii).

“Revelatory perception” is an apt phrase for the aesthetic effect Robinson seeks in *Gilead*’s many examples of quotidian description. It is debatable, however, whether perception is a specifically American cultural inheritance. Certainly there is a strong European tradition of ecstatic perception that has its roots in Catholicism. Gerard Manley Hopkins and James Joyce are examples of that tradition. And the extended description of the quotidian eventually became something of a convention of modernist writing, taken to new extremes of detail in Proust and Nabokov, though shorn of any religious significance. Robinson, then, has plenty of company on both sides of the Atlantic in her high valuation of perception.

That being said, it is worth noting that John Updike, the only other major post-war American writer of Reformed Protestant sensibilities—Updike was also a Congregationalist—places an extremely high value on ordinary perception. Of his own aesthetic tendency to give detailed attention to the ordinary, Updike writes, “My only duty was to describe reality as it had come to me—to give the mundane its beautiful due” (xv). In Robinson’s review of Updike’s short story collection *Trust Me* she lavishes praise on this aspect of his work:

The plainest objects and events bloom in these stories as if they had at last found their proper climate. In the conclusion to "Deaths of Distant Friends" there is a description of a dead dog which is splendid: "The thunderbolt had hit my former pet by moonlight, his heart full of marshy joy and his stomach fat with garbage, and he had lain for days with ruffling fur while the tides went in and out. The image makes me happy, like the sight of

a sail popping full of wind and tugging its boat swiftly out from shore." The passage is, altogether, a virtuoso's laughing demonstration that gorgeousness inheres in anything ("At Play").

Robinson's praise of Updike's aestheticism, his ability to find gorgeousness in anything, even a dead dog, has its roots in the Calvinist value of beautiful perception. Although they differ in what they describe—Updike's aestheticism affirms bodies and sex while Robinson has all but expunged the erotic from her work—together their work testifies to the Protestant disposition toward beauty both formally and thematically. It is Robinson and Updike's unique contribution to American letters to have carried the Calvinist cultural inheritance of perception into the 21st century. This is in sharp contrast to American writers of Catholic sensibility like Flannery O'Connor or Cormac McCarthy who value the ugly and the grotesque. In *Gilead*, we do not find dismembered bodies or violent intrusions of grace. We have instead John Ames telling us that "Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see" (245).

Robinson's use of the language of perception in *Gilead* is not simply to suggest the sacramental quality of ordinary experience. It serves multiple functions in developing character, tone, and theme. A soap bubble is a soap bubble, of course, a point of beauty and therefore, for Robinson, a locus of the sacred. But it is also a metaphor:

I saw a bubble float past my window, fat and wobbly and ripening toward that dragonfly blue they turn just before they burst. So I looked down at the yard and there you were, you and your mother, blowing bubbles at the cat, such a barrage of them that the poor beast was beside herself at the glut of opportunity. She was actually leaping in the air, our insouciant Soapy! Some of the bubbles drifted up through the branches, even above

the trees. You two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors. They were very lovely. (9)

The bubble begins as a point of perception, akin to Dickinson's speaker seeing that "certain slant of light," and ends with a theological metaphor that "you two were too intent on the cat to see the celestial consequences of your worldly endeavors." The mother/child/cat exist on the imminent plane of the world, sending bubbles—metaphors of human action, perhaps—floating up to the transcendent plane of heaven where they resonate with "celestial consequences." The soap bubbles are soap bubbles, but they are also metaphors for the interpenetration of the imminent and eternal. Not only that, but the bubbles and cat stand as figurations of Ames. Because of his disease, he too is ready to "burst" like the bubble. But for some mysterious reason he will experience a last great surge of life once Jack Boughton comes to town, as uncharacteristic as Soapy's leaps. In other words, Robinson sets perception to work in multiple ways, and in doing so carries forward the habit of converting the ordinary into meaningful metaphors, a technique learned from Melville, Dickinson, and Emerson and put to wonderful use in *Housekeeping*.

Reinventing the Middle West

Since *Housekeeping*, Robinson has self-consciously used fiction to construct regional identities—the "West" in *Housekeeping* and the "Middle West" in *Gilead* and *Home*. The Middle West of *Gilead* presents a different problem for Robinson. While the West is overloaded with representations—an entire narrative genre being devoted to "westerns"—the rural Midwest has a relative representational dearth or absence. In popular culture, the state of Iowa might bring to mind the film *Field of Dreams* or the painting "American Gothic" by Grant Wood or, every four years, the state which hosts the presidential caucuses. But for many who have never

lived in Iowa, the state is a kind of cultural and historical blank. Iowa is just another “fly-over” state. This cultural forgetfulness is an opportunity for the Robinson to undertake important cultural work. She can imagine the Midwest free from the noise of previous representations.

In speaking about her eventual move to Iowa, Robinson explains “I never expected to live in the Middle West because I had the same prejudices that other people have about the region” (23). What are these prejudices? In her essay “McGuffey and the Abolitionists,” Robinson writes that the Middle West is “a highly distinctive and crucial region which is very generally assumed to have neither culture nor history” (*Death* 132). This assumption, that the Midwest lacks culture and history, is what *Gilead* seeks to correct. The novel seeks to confer upon the Midwest a distinctive identity by emphasizing its special contributions to culture and history, which Robinson neatly characterizes as the region’s “tradition of intellectualism and populism, moral seriousness and cultural progressivism” (147).

In imagining the regional identity of the Midwest, Robinson had to make critical decisions as to *how* the region should be presented. It would not be a portrait of the entire region, but only one small community. And the community would primarily be inflected through a single voice:

The Middle West is a true mosaic of ethnic communities, each with its own narrative. So I know that my perspective is very limited. Still, because these New Englanders came into the region so early, and because they were intent on realizing important reforms of many kinds, they had a great influence in a formative period. That was very interesting to me. I have a habit of doing historical research about places where I live. For a while I read a great deal of English and French history to help me understand what I saw in those

places. In this case, I found that a voice presented itself to me, which was theological and Iowan. (Hoezee)

If history and voice are the primary methods for revising received notions of the Midwest, it is notable that, unlike *Housekeeping*, landscape plays a reduced role in *Gilead*.

It is not that we don't have any landscapes, but rather that they lack a distinctive, individuated quality. The narrator John Ames tells us, "I have lived my life on the prairie and a line of oak trees can still astonish me" (57). Such a description is typical. We are presented with a "line of oak trees," whose physical appearance—their shape, their color, the quality of their leaves—are omitted. The descriptions seem aimed to capture a general atmosphere rather than specific physical detail. Technical language from botany or biology is all but absent. "Boughton and I used to sit on the roof of it and look out over the neighbors' gardens and the fields" (37-38). This rare moment of elevation, when Boughton and Ames are seated on a roof, suggests an opportunity to report the landscape. Instead we have the generic "gardens" and "fields,"—nothing of what grew in the gardens or fields, or their shape, size, scale, or color. The animals which appear are mostly domesticated, such as cats and chickens. At the close of the novel, we are not left with a sense of the Midwest grounded in natural history or in landscape. Knowing Robinson's power to evoke landscape and her outspoken environmentalism—how do we explain this absence? We could simply say Ames is no botanist and leave it at that. But I think this de-emphasizing of landscape makes possible a deeper engagement with where Robinson wants to locate regional identity—in history, cultural achievements, and voice. One will not find Robinson's Middle West in the flowers or hills or lakes of Iowa, but rather in the invisible spaces of history and memory.

This absence of landscape connects to the relative absence of bodily descriptions in *Gilead*. What does John Ames look like? For many readers of *Gilead*, I'd imagine this is a difficult question. We are offered only a few, brief descriptive details. Ames writes, "I have a good head of hair, not as evenly distributed as it might be, but pretty thick where it grows and a good white. My eyebrows are white, too, and quite thick" (167). What color are his eyes? "The irises of my eyes have begun to melt at the edges a little. They never were any particular color, and now they're a lighter shade" (167). Like the novel's generic landscapes, these descriptions do not evoke the physicality of a particular person. This is a description of a generic old man. The narrator almost seems aware of this. He writes, "I know I'm a perfectly passable old fellow with regard to my appearance, for what that's worth" (167). The relative omission of bodily descriptions relates to the relative omissions of gesture and bodily movements. People in *Gilead* walk and run, but specifically evoking *how* they run or walk is unimportant. This is not a novel that richly evokes the external appearances of the body, nor the erotic needs of the body, presumably because those needs are no longer important to the elderly John Ames. Robinson's omission of physical details is an important departure from the accumulation of details which is the hallmark of traditional realism. John Ames' particularity and individuality, and by extension the Midwest's particularity and individuality, is not established through external appearances. There is a paradoxical logic at work here that Calvin would admire: reduce the body to reveal the soul. Robinson wants to move us beyond material appearance in order to highlight the "soul" of the Midwest, its distinctive cultural achievements, in particular the achievement of the abolitionists.

Cultural and political progressivism is code for the abolitionists, and the history of New England abolitionists moving to the Midwest comprises an important historical backdrop for the

novel. But Robinson is not only concerned with the abolitionist fight against slavery. She's equally attuned to the cultural impact of the colleges the abolitionists founded. *Gilead* directly refers to Lane Theological Seminary and Oberlin College, both founded by New England Protestants, an important feature of what Robinson identifies as the Midwest's progressive intellectual tradition. These schools not only served as sources for abolitionist pamphlets and ideas, but they also experimented with racial and gender integration. At the end of her essays on the abolitionists, Robinson calls attention to "the unprejudiced admission of women to Oberlin College, and the unprejudiced admission of blacks to Oberlin College, and the proliferation of schools, especially in the Middle West, meant to promote and to normalize just such reforms" (147). Robinson won't let us forget that before Civil Rights and feminism, the Midwest had already made these progressive achievements. It contains rich traditions of radical reform, which ought to be of enormous value for any reform-minded liberal, or for liberal Christians like Robinson who are committed to an ethic of openhanded generosity. This is why Ulysses Grant called Iowa "the shining star of radicalism," a quote which appears several times in *Gilead*. Nor will she let us forget the irony of how history erased these progressive achievements, the fact that a town founded as an abolitionist settlement is in 1957 too racist to accommodate a mixed-race couple. The irony that Jack and his family cannot move to "the shining star of radicalism" out of fear of racism is a dramatization of the consequences of historical forgetfulness. As Ames sorrowfully says, "These little towns were once the bold ramparts meant to shelter just such peace," the peace of racial harmony (242). Jack's sorrowful flight from Gilead is a reason to keep historical memory alive, which is clearly what Robinson sought to do for the Midwest in *Gilead*.

Robinson also opposes another misinterpretation of the Midwest—its perceived intellectual backwardness. The inclusion of high cultural discourse, by which I mean allusions to poetry, theology, philosophy, can be read as an important revision of the Midwest as intellectually stultifying. Indeed, John Ames is an intellectual of sorts, a prolific writer—by his estimate the author of “two hundred twenty-five books” which “puts [him] up there with Augustine and Calvin for quantity”—he also knows Greek and Hebrew, quotes John Donne, and reads Ludwig Feuerbach. He is a figure of the Midwestern intellectual, a man deeply engaged with the ideas of his day, especially those imported from Germany by Edward.

The tension between the perceived cultural backwardness of the Midwest and the cultural forwardness of Europe is dramatized in the relationship between Ames and his brother Edward, who upon returning home from studying in Germany, tells Ames that Gilead is “a backwater—you must be aware of that already. Leaving here is like waking from a trance” (26). For Edward, the Midwest is a space of cultural naiveté and willful illusion, a place untouched by modernity and unaware of global cultural movements. Edward hopes to shake Ames out of his “uncritical piety” and take some of the “Middle West out of [him]” (24). If one wants to discover the “modern,” one takes flight from the Midwest, as Edward does. Indeed, most of our literary representations of the Midwest confirm this tendency toward flight. Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* ends with a chapter titled “Departure.” But also consider the authors of literary modernism—Eliot, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and Hart Crane—all of whom were born in the Midwest and eventually fled either to New York or Western Europe in search of the modern. In these fictional and biographical narratives of flight, the Midwest is understood as constrained by conservative, anti-modern cultural tendencies, imposing limits on freedom and expression. *Gilead* revises this tendency toward flight. Robinson imagines the Midwest as a

space of settlement rather than a space from which to take flight. In other words, it is a space of desire, a space one desires to be in rather than to flee. Relevant to this point is the fact that John Ames never leaves Iowa, which is Robinson's way of saying that a perfectly respectable intellectual life can be lived in the Midwest, in places just like Gilead, Iowa. This is perhaps why John Ames is immobile, having "lived seventy-six years, seventy-four of them here in Gilead, Iowa, excepting study at the college and at seminary" (9). Like Ames, Robinson seems content to call Iowa her home.

Chapter Three

The Novel: *Home*

Instead of the twenty-four year wait between novels, Robinson surprised critics and fans by publishing *Home* (2008) just four years after *Gilead*. Like all of Robinson's fiction, the critical reception of *Home* was warm and positive. Reviewing for *The New York Times*, A.O. Scott wrote, "It is at once hard and forgiving, bitter and joyful, fanatical and serene. It is a wild, eccentric, radical work of literature that grows out of the broadest, most fertile, most familiar native literary tradition" ("Return"). Clare Messud judged *Home* as superior to *Gilead*, writing

the pure metaphysics of *Gilead*—so intensely admired by many, but to me, in its stalwart piety and resolute humorlessness, a noble but rather wearing exercise—give way in *Home* to the messier, slacker, more repetitive, and at times more strained rhythms of quotidian life, while addressing, no less intently, broader spiritual, ethical, and philosophical questions. ("Witnesses")

Messud goes on to say, "What is remarkable about *Home*—and why it is, to this reader, an even stronger accomplishment than its companion volume; not in spite of its longueurs and its repetitiveness but because of them—is that it is both a spiritual and a mundane accounting" ("Witnesses"). While *Home* was nominated for a National Book Award, it did not take home any major domestic prizes, making its reception slightly more subdued than *Gilead*. However, Robinson did win one major award, the Orange Prize for Fiction, the British prize for best Anglophone fiction by a female author.

A Gilead Novel

One common concern among all the reviews of *Home* is the question of its relationship to *Gilead*. Obviously, the books overlap in important ways. Both novels share a time and place—Gilead, Iowa in the late 1950s—as well as a set of characters, with the Ames family as the focus of *Gilead* and the Boughton family the focus of *Home*. But the idea of *Home* as a “companion piece” or side-by-side novel lends it a peculiar status. It is not quite a sequel and not quite an independent novel either. Out of this uncertain status, certain questions arise. What difference would it make to read *Home* before *Gilead*? Does the ultimate meaning of *Home* depend on a reading of *Gilead*?

Robinson invites such questions on solid literary ground, since many authors have written multiple books about a single space and time. An important precedent is William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County novels, and like Faulkner’s novels, *Home* can be meaningfully read apart from *Gilead*. A reasonable approach to these difficulties is to point to Robinson’s skillful and subtle interweaving of *Gilead* and *Home* and the resulting enlargement of narrative complexity and irony, which suggests that readers are highly encouraged, but never required, to read them side by side in order of publication.

One of the effects of doing so is a shift in how one reads *Gilead*. Specifically it injects error into the narrative, mostly in form of misperceptions of other people. For example, Ames says of Boughton, “His daughter Glory is home with him now. Her marriage failed, and that is a sad thing” (18). In *Home* it is revealed that Glory never married, and we see that Ames along with Boughton remains in ignorance about this fact. The relative absence of Glory from Ames’ narration is another important omission, revealing the limitations of Ames’ attention, his inability to fully register the beauty of Glory’s character. Ames believes he made a mistake in delivering

the sermon on Hagar and Ishmael. In *Home* the sermon is the cause of terrible emotional damage to the entire Boughton family, nearly compromising his life-long friendship with Boughton. At the end of *Gilead*, Jack believes Glory will never forgive him for leaving before his father's funeral. In *Home*, she has forgiven him entirely. Many other examples could be added to this list, but in general they all fit this pattern of revealing how subjective knowledge is always in some degree in error. Thus, reading *Gilead* and *Home* together creates a form of irony, a doubleness wherein anything a character knows about another is both subjectively true and objectively false, allowing Robinson to imagine social reality in a complex, multifaceted way that has always marked the real in her work.

The other point of interaction between the two novels is thematic. The relation between father and son, race and society, and the religious problems of predestination, redemption, faith, and forgiveness are present across both books. In *Gilead* as in *Home*, the parable of the Prodigal Son is the essential mythological structure for both narratives, as they feature two different perspectives on the disruption caused by Jack Boughton's return. So both narratives incorporate ideas of the fall, disgraced exile, and homecoming, and explore the question of whether the son can ever be atoned (at-oned) with the father, whether Jack's "spiritual father" Ames or actual father Boughton can ever forgive him. This essentially Biblical structure is worth dwelling on for a moment. It's one that bridges the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament, which is figured in the placement of Jack's four letters home, "tucked between the Testaments" (68). However, the difference between *Home*—and *Gilead* for that matter—and the Prodigal Son parable is that Robinson insists on framing this structure within a realist, humanistic worldview. In other words, she rejects the possibility of allegory by denying the kind of idealized characterization that allegory requires. Flannery O'Connor's flat, cartoon-like characterization is

easier to map onto her spiritual allegories of violence and grace. As a Catholic and an admirer of Latin iconography, this allegorical tendency came easily to O'Connor. But Robinson, as a Calvinist and scholar of Shakespeare, is indebted to the "deep" subjectivities of Renaissance humanism. She is ideologically and temperamentally opposed to abstract, flat, typological definitions of human nature. It is with a kind of irony—directed against O'Connor?—that the Boughton women are named after theological abstractions: "Sometimes instead of Grace and Glory they had called their little sisters Justification and Sanctification, which came near irritating their father" (53). Robinson seems to mock the attempt to make human lives stand in for theological ideas. Humans are always irreducibly complex and mysterious. Glory, Jack, and Boughton lead messy, flawed, conflicted lives. And *Home* was written in part to show how spiritual themes are realized and embodied within the context of ordinary, fallible human experience.

Other themes cross over between the two books. *Home* amplifies and extends the theological question of predestination that obsesses Jack and so there is an extension of the scene in *Gilead* where the idea is debated between Jack, Boughton, Ames, and Lila. The clash of faith between Ames and his brother finds its counterpoint in the opposition between Jack's agnosticism and Glory's theism. The status of African Americans in *Gilead* is rendered in historical terms, as the fight for abolition and its ironic aftermath, while in *Home* it is made present through newspaper and television reports on the Civil Rights movement and the tension between Boughton's unconscious racism and Jack's identification with African Americans. In sum, the two novels share a broad swath of thematic material—fathers and sons, religion and race—but beyond these important similarities are many differences.

The first set of differences is signaled in the titles. *Gilead* has a more expansive scope, with Ames' life embedded into the history of the town, a history that spans roughly one-hundred years. *Home*'s scope is considerably narrower, circumscribed to the Boughton family and temporally condescend to a few weeks. The contrast between the city and the family reflect the difference between the Ames and Boughton families. The Ames family is presumably of English heritage, having immigrated much earlier to America and settled into New England (Maine). This is reflected in their religiously affiliation with New England Congregationalists. When Ames considers Gilead, it is not just personal reminiscences that occur to him, but also the narrative of immigration into the Midwest and the Civil War. The Boughtons are Scottish and immigrated after the Civil War and identify as Scottish Presbyterians. Boughton says, "We left Scotland in the fall of 1870, so we missed out on the war and the rest of it. There was a lot of what you might call fanaticism around here in the early days" (203-204). For the Boughtons, Gilead is personal not political, the site of family happiness and misfortune. Besides the Prodigal Son template, the other basic theme of *Home* is the fall of a family, as ancient a theme as The Book of Job or *The Oresteia*. But instead of dramatizing the fall, Robinson situates the fall in the past so as to examine the aftermath of the tragedy, to explore ideas of how shattered families reconstitute themselves after a crisis. *Home* asks whether a broken family can heal, whether tragedy can be undone. History, then, in the wider political sense, is not an anxiety for the Boughton family (except for Jack), since there is no remembered strain of violence and guilt that runs through the generations. It is family history that strains the Boughtons, in marked contrast to Ames' harmonious family life. In each of her novels, Robinson has interrogated the institution of the family, but it is in *Home* that the dynamics of family relations are given its fullest and most intimate portrayal.

Another line of difference is gender. *Gilead* is almost exclusively focused on fathers and sons, while *Home* explores for the first time in Robinson's fiction the relation between daughters and fathers. Glory's homecoming is personally vexing, but she does not have a dramatically charged relation to her father compared to Jack. Her relation to Boughton is characterized by dutiful habit, made possible by rigidly defined roles. More dramatic, however, is the relation between brother-sister, between Jack and Glory, which is another new relational reality for Robinson. Indeed, the slow, tentative movement toward intimacy and trust between them is one of the mainlines of *Home*'s plot. Overall, the strong focalizing presence of Glory, so unassuming that she is barely mentioned in *Gilead*, signals a return to the female experience of *Housekeeping*. There are no house burnings in *Home*, but there is for Glory and Lila a positive assertion of self-denial similar to *Housekeeping*'s asceticism. As Messud puts it:

Robinson makes clear that it is Glory and, like her, John Ames's wife Lila who are the creators and the perpetuators of Home, whatever that may be; and, moreover, that this selfless creation requires self-sacrifice, if not self-abnegation. It is Lila who, in the men's fateful conversation about predestination and perdition, reassures Jack that "a person can change. Everything can change"; and yet it is she, and Glory, who, in tending the gardens and preparing the meals, ensure that things—the orderly and reassuring things—stay the same. For themselves, it may be a death of a kind, the resignation of all that the wider world once seemed to offer (in Glory's case, falsely, for the good; in Lila's case, one surmises, frankly for ill). ("Witnesses")

Robinson's positive presentation of Glory, a pious and dutiful spinster, is another example of her desire to animate the complicated inner lives of ordinary women, perhaps a chief factor in her winning the Orange Prize.

The last major difference between them is formal. *Gilead* is written as a first-person epistolary novel and *Home* is written in the third-person, focalized through Glory's perspective. The effect is that *Home* reads much more like a traditional realist novel. In fact, Robinson's third novel is her official entrance into the conventions, techniques, and concerns that traditionally define the "novel." In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye distinguished the novel from other prose genres in several ways. Its "plot and dialogue are closely linked to the conventions of the comedy of manners;" the plot maneuvers around "a central situation;" "the novelists deals with personality, with characters wearing their *personae* or social masks;" and it has a tendency to "dissolve all theory into personal relationships" (304-305, 308). If *Housekeeping* is a romance and *Gilead* a confessional epistolary novel, then *Home* is Robinson's first novel. The only complication to this categorization is that *Home* does deal in religious ideas, however briefly, which in Frye's system marks the genre of "confession." That being said, the reader of *Home* finds a more immediate affinity with what Frye calls "the exhaustive analysis of human relationship," which he says characterizes the novels of Henry James, perhaps the essential influence on Robinson's third novel.

The Jamesian influence is most widely sensed in *Home*'s extreme subtlety. Robinson allows her characters change at more or less the pace of human's change, which is to say slowly and minutely. Robinson's artistry lies in having the patience and courage to allow her characters to change at their own incremental, hesitant pace. There is nothing rushed or forced about *Home*. The risk for the reader is obviously boredom and impatience with the sluggish tempo of change, and the absence of sex or violence to sensationalize the plot. But the reward is a rich impression of the process of inner change, one that does not rely on gimmicks but on the slow waltz of social interaction. It's indebted to a tradition of realist subtlety that begins with James,

moves through Hemingway, and is perhaps closest to the contemporary aesthetics of Alice Munro.

The Jamesian influence is felt most directly in her deployment of a third-person narrator, a first in her fiction and a crucially meaningful decision. Messud's captures one of the meanings of this point of view:

Robinson, throughout *Home*, is tackling almost the opposite of what she undertook in *Gilead*: rather than granting a direct and illuminated voice to a single, thoughtful soul, she stands back—writing in the third person, albeit in a third person that privileges Glory's point of view—and allows her characters to perform their small daily rituals, to have their conversations, to live through their misunderstandings, each in his or her particular isolation. (“Witnesses”)

The great majority consists of scenes of dramatic interaction between characters, and Robinson has never written so much dialogue before. How characters think is less of a concern than how they behave in social situations. *Home* strikes a balance between Robinson's concerns in *Housekeeping* with consciousness—perception, attention, knowledge, memory—and the ethical concerns of *Gilead*, namely loyalty, trust, betrayal, forgiveness.

This shift to the “third-person limited” does have implications that extend beyond *Home*'s meaning and style, and converge upon the biographical, specifically Robinson's institutional status as a faculty member at Iowa's famous Writers' Workshop. What can be said about her work within that famous institution? What affect or influence has it had on her writing? To respond to these difficult questions in anything like the complexity they deserve, scholars will have to wait for more biographical information about Robinson. I raise them here in order to suggest a potentially fruitful line of inquiry. In *The Program Era*, Mark McGurl

traces the dominance of Jamesian “dramatic method” specifically to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, situating it within the narrative poetics of Flannery O’Connor. However tempting it might be, it is going too far, I think, to interpret *Home* as a reproduction of aesthetic tendencies that supposedly dominate the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. This would result in a reading of *Home* as an allegorical expression of Iowa’s “institutional logic” or something like that. The idea is reductive, both to the complex variety of aesthetic modes currently welcomed by Iowa and to the rationality involved in Robinson’s choice to dramatize her story using Jamesian techniques. A more generous characterization of the relationship between *Home* and the Writers’ Workshop is to see Robinson working within what might be called the Workshop tradition, whose faculty and graduates are most responsible for extending the Jamesian tradition in American writing.

While Robinson’s relationship with the Writers’ Workshop connects to questions of narrative technique, it may also be evidenced in the novel’s Midwestern setting. As McGurl writes, the Writers’ Workshop was originally inspired by a literary movement of Midwestern regionalism:

It would be wrong to say that Iowa Writers’ Workshop was an epiphenomenon of literary regionalism, but not entirely wrong. As detailed by Stephen Wilbers in his quasi-official history of the program, it did emerge amidst a thriving, self-consciously Midwestern cultural scene, and it was infused with further regionalist consciousness by the several prominently southern Southerners who traveled north to teach and study there in the early years of its existence. Opposed equally to a dislocated mass culture and to a deracinated cosmopolitan high culture, regionalism’s celebration of the particularities of place was fundamental to the aesthetic sensibilities imparted at Iowa, and to the continuing power

of the injunction to the individual writer, raised among those particularities, to “write what you know.” (149)

Robinson is, of course, one of the most conspicuously successful of the Workshop’s faculty, and she is consistently identified with it wherever her name appears and an authorial blurb is required. Her embrace of the institution and the region has been emphatic, as evidenced by her essays on Midwestern culture. And her work is self-consciously regionalist in its celebration of particularity and its rejection of “dislocated mass culture” and “cosmopolitan high culture.” Understood against the background of this institutional history, *Home* might be read as a revival of one of the Workshop’s foundational meanings, to recreate it once again as a vital source of Midwestern regionalism.

As potentially interesting as these speculations are, what they cannot account for is Robinson’s individuality, her integrity as a fiction writer who has continually pushed herself to explore new forms, genres, relationships, and themes. She seems unwilling to be identified with a single prose style or voice, flexibly modifying the sound of her language to the needs of her characters. She is unwilling to settle into a style, as each of her book’s styles deny and complicate the previous book’s, as if they were each written by a different author. This constant exploration of her own boundaries and limits as a writer certainly points to her belief that a writer never rests on convention or past achievements. She is always in process, struggling to reinvent herself with every new work, all the while remaining singularly herself.

The Style of the Ordinary

One entry point into *Home* is to consider the many meanings of the “ordinary,” an essential interpretative concept for understanding the character, language, and ideology of the

novel. Interpreted thematically, Glory, Jack, and Boughton confront the repetitions of ordinary life and have differing attitudes toward it, sometimes to celebrate it, mourn it, or escape from it. But the “ordinary” is a concept whose implications and suggestiveness moves beyond its appearance in *Home*’s plot and character development. Robinson’s attentiveness to it is essential to the overall aesthetic effect and purpose of her third novel.

According to philosopher Charles Taylor, whose *Sources of the Self* charts the emergence of the ordinary within Western cultural history, an important dimension of modern identity has privileged the ethical ideals of “ordinary life,” what he calls the life of labor or production and sexual life or reproduction—sometimes known as the “bourgeois ethic”—an ideal that displaced previous notions of the good life, including contemplation, political participation, and the aristocratic honor ethic. This he calls, in a phrase that resonates with Robinson’s work, “the affirmation of ordinary life.” What is important about Taylor’s discussion for understanding *Home* is how deeply this “affirmation” is indebted to the Reformation—particularly the Puritans’ interpretation of the Reformation—and so to Robinson’s Protestant ideology.

The Reformers critique of the medieval church, their rejection of the idea of sacred times and sacred spaces, their rejection of the church’s mediating role between humans and the divine, their repudiation of monastic vocations, made what was once considered “profane life” the only life worth living. Monks and nuns were not “closer” to God because, according to the Reformers, God operated by grace alone and could not be supplicated by works of renunciation. The hierarchy between religious and layperson was compromised:

Thus by the same movement through which the Protestant churches rejected a special order of priesthood in favour of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, they also rejected the special vocation to the monastic life and affirmed the *spiritual value of lay*

life. By denying any special form of life as a privileged locus of the sacred, they were denying the very distinction between sacred and profane and hence affirming their interpenetration. (217, my italics)

The result is “the affirmation that the fullness of Christian existence was to be found within the activities of this life, in one’s calling and in marriage and the family” (218). It is a major cultural shift best embodied by Martin Luther, who ceased being a monk and married a former nun.

The Puritans gave these anti-hierarchical ideas and the hallowing of ordinary life their most extreme expression, particularly with their notion of “vocation,” God’s specific call for an individual’s labor, no matter how mundane. In *Home*, Glory’s work certainly qualifies as mundane. She was a schoolteacher, a line of work with higher status (and pay) than what she does at the Boughton home, mostly cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, and gardening. Yet by giving Glory’s ordinary domestic labor so much space in the novel, Robinson suggests its sanctity and value. Taylor summarizes this Puritan ideal: “The highest life can no longer be defined by an exalted *kind* of activity; it all turns on the *spirit* in which one lives whatever one lives, even the most mundane existence” (224). The Puritan William Perkins puts it this way: “Now if we compare worke to worke, there is a difference betwixt washing of dishes, and preaching of the word of God: but as touching to please God none at all” (224).

Taylor calls this Perkins’ articulation of the “sanctification of the ordinary,” a perfect phrase for the meaning of Glory’s mundane labor, which indeed includes the “washing of dishes.” Glory speaks of the “skills of the ordinary”: “It had somehow never seemed to her that the place had his attention, or it seemed he was attentive to strategies of evasion and places of concealment, never to the skills of the ordinary, dutiful choring that made up most of every life, and was so much the worth and the pride of that life, by local reckoning” (61). The fact that

Glory does this expressly for others, out of a spirit of kindness and duty for her father and brother, qualifies it as a vocation under the Puritan rubric. That this ordinary labor needs to be repeated daily, and that Robinson is willing to risk tiring reader's attention with this repetition, only seems to confirm Milton's Puritan formulation in *Paradise Lost*, that "To know/That which before us lies in daily life/Is the prime wisdom" (227). *Home* is self-consciously a part of this Protestant cultural history, and perhaps the best aesthetic analogy to it is Dutch paintings like those of Vermeer. His genre pictures of domestic scenes doused in numinous light have a similar quality as Robinson's fiction. Both artists aim to make the everyday radiant and mysterious.

A.O. Scott's review touches on this idea, that the everyday for Robinson has a strange, almost terrifying quality. He writes,

Most of what might be called the action in *Home* consists of the movements of a few characters — Glory, her father and her brother Jack — around their grand old house, from kitchen to living room, from garden to porch. They speak with sometimes strained politeness as they busy themselves with mundane domestic tasks. But those quotidian facts of what Glory thinks of as "difficult, ordinary life" feel, in Robinson's hand, like vessels of the terrible, the sublime, the miraculous. ("Return")

Scott captures one of the aesthetic effects of *Home*, how the ordinary functions as a source of "the sublime, the miraculous." And it is not just the domestic rituals that have this quality, but also the very ordinariness of the book's theme of the Prodigal returning. Scott elaborates this idea by tracing it to Glory's memory of Psalm 78. "I will open my mouth in a parable. I will utter dark sayings of old, which we have heard and known, and our fathers have told us" (102). The Psalm suggests "that familiar stories and pieces of wisdom can nonetheless be obscure, even

sinister or magical, in their lessons and meanings” (“Return”). Here Scott hits on one of Robinson subtler intentions: by making the ordinary, the commonplace, and the truism strange again, she can refresh and refashion their meanings, and make them speak again in a different culture.

Though it is difficult to generalize about Robinson’s aesthetics, her project of bringing old truths into a new age does share some similarities with modernism’s refashioning of tradition. However, anyone who has read *Home* would hesitate to call it “modernist” insofar as that term suggests radical experimentation with form. Robinson is clearly comfortable with nineteenth-century novelistic conventions, linear plotting, and scenic dramatization. The pacing is slow, steady, never rushed or erratic, intolerant toward the spastic energies of anxiety or fear. Rather than pursuing a project of absolute creation, making something wholly new like *Finnegans Wake*, Robinson’s strategy is to go so deep into the ordinary, into the conventions, themes, and languages that structure everyday life, that they breathe altogether with new vitality. While the modernist guards against clichés and worn-out language with irony, Robinson moves into tired, worn-out language to realize their profundity again.

Robinson’s plain style and diction represents another level of its engagement with the ordinary. Almost no word could be as banal as “home.” But after reading *Home*, the word has been given over to so many complicated meanings that it is difficult to think about “home” anymore without it radiating a kind of strangeness. Or consider the word “nothing” in its many guises, a key word from *King Lear* that resonates with Boughton and Jack’s decline. “There’s really nothing like a good dumpling,” becomes “I really am nothing...Nothing, with a body” (280, 288). Prison is “as congenial a place to be nothing as I could ever hope to find” (289). “Nothing I can sustain on my own” (289). “I don’t have anything to lose” (295). Other

common words are repeated constantly and given new, complex meanings are “kindness,” “honor,” “weary.” Scott lists others:

She is somehow able to infuse what can sound like dowdy, common words—words like courtesy and kindness, shame and forgiveness, transgression and grace—with a startling measure of their old luster and gravity. Phrases many of us have heard and known since childhood come in her hands to have the depth of dark sayings. (“Return”)

Robinson’s use of repetition in diction is also present in her repetition of scenes. Mirroring and juxtaposition of scene creates meaning in *Home*. The inability to achieve confession and vulnerability between Jack and Boughton (114-116) is immediately countered with a confessional moment between Jack and Glory (117). It not just a stylistic quirk that *Home* does not have chapter breaks. The juxtaposition of scene after scene, producing meaning and counter-meanings, continuities and oppositions, results in the effect of daily-ness, an aesthetic privileging of the rituals of everyday life.

In sum, the ordinary is anything but ordinary for Robinson. Rather, it partakes of the uncanny. This paradoxical effect of familiarity and strangeness does not produce repulsion or anxiety, as Freud’s famous essay claims. It is a cognitive disruption that Robinson associates with religious experience, what she calls the “holiness of the everyday.”

The Meanings of Home

As a fiction writer, Robinson is drawn to the dynamics of the triad. *Housekeeping* featured the triad of Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille; *Home* the threesome of Boughton, Jack, and Glory. Although the themes of the novels are quite distinct, the relational structure is roughly the same, with a pair of siblings negotiating their relationship to each other and to an authority

figure. Again in *Home*, Robinson is uninterested in using the triangular structure as it is traditionally deployed in literature, as a means of exploring desire, jealousy, and the erotic generally. Erotic desire and possession are entirely off-stage in *Home*, happening in the far-off cities where Jack and Glory have fled. Indeed, the Boughton home is a kind of anti-erotic space, a nunnery for Glory and a monastery for Jack, a space where even dreams of longing are suppressed. The relationships, because they are family, are entirely drained of erotic potential, which has the effect of isolating the ethical themes that are Robinson's true subject: familial duty, loyalty, honor, and justice.

Home explores three very distinct moral worlds, with little overlap between them. As Jack says—and it applies to each of the characters—“I’m in one universe and you’re in another” (267). The patriarch Boughton occupies the place of pride—pride especially in his humility and his belief in the limitlessness of grace and forgiveness. But while Boughton often speaks of grace, he is also an embodiment of the law, a kind of Pharisaical patriarch, whose absolute moral judgments rule over every aspect of behavior. Jack, on the other hand, is consumed by irony. There is a doubleness to Jack, a clash between his polished appearance and his anguished interior, that makes him the most intriguing and mysterious character in the book. He is extremely sensitive about how he is perceived by others, attempting to mask the shame that is at the center of his identity. Like any ironist, he has spent so much time viewing himself from the imagined perspective of others, viewing himself from the third-person perspective has slipped into his speech: “Jack Boughton,” he says, “is in hell over nothing at all” (142). Rowan Williams writes, “Jack’s irony is, we might say, the wrong kind of attention, an attention to himself in the eyes of others rather than to the act or the word or the relational reality itself” (8). He is Robinson’s most self-divided character, and her association of irony with agony is

consistent with her preference, most notably in her essays, for a tone of sincerity, seriousness, and honesty.

Where Jack is duplicitous and double, Glory is simple and singular. Her chief motivation is duty. When Jack seems surprised that she goes to church, Glory replies, “Last in, first out. I have to do that. It matters to Papa” (49). Glory’s loyalty to her father informs her piety. Whenever theological issues come up, she quotes her father. Her reading of the Bible in the morning and evening is done “with the thought that her father would be pleased if he knew” (102). Her inner tension is between the duty she feels toward serving her family—toward her Papa—and her personal desire for a happy, independent life, a home of her own.

Of course, since Robinson is a novelist and not a moralist, these ideals are constantly coming under strain, even breaking at times. Boughton shows genuine humility, Jack is sincere and vulnerable at times, and Glory does question the oppression of duty. But since everyone in *Home* is already an adult, there will be no merging of identities, as Ruth does with Sylvie. Glory, Jack, and Boughton’s worlds have been relatively established, sealed off from one another by chasms of gender, age, experience, and personal temperament. Yet, they all share what Glory will come to call “destitution.” For her, it is the loss of the hope for a family. For Jack, it is the inability to find home in Gilead. And for Boughton, it is the realization that everything he worked for is being destroyed. The white, clapboard church is replaced by a “much costlier building, monumental in style” (49). His mind grows weaker, first in small slippages of memory and awareness, culminating in spasms of hallucination, symptoms of what appears to be dementia. In a summary of his life, Boughton says, “I lost my church,” and then “I lost my wife” (296). Robinson insists on the singular loneliness of subjective experience and the rarity of initiating

radical change as an adult. In *Home*, adult loneliness can never be fully transcended but only briefly attenuated in moments of mutual vulnerability.

Home begins and ends in Glory's world. The words that greet her upon her arrival in Gilead prove to be prophetic: "Home to stay, Glory! Yes!" (3). Glory is indeed "home to stay," since she will learn she is to inherit the ancestral home, barn and all. "Yes!" is Boughton's habitual refrain, suggestive of his seemingly inexhaustible capacity for affirmation, to see even the worst, most painful events as convertible into goodness and grace. "Yes!" is the essence of Boughton's theology and identity, and *Home* charts the limitations of his affirming openness. To his "Yes!" Glory's inward response is "Oh, no." "Dear God, she thought, dear God in heaven. So began and ended all her prayers these days, which were really cries of amazement. How could her father be so frail?" (3). Glory's homecoming brings a new meaning to the idea of home. The feeling is not one of refuge but horror, a confrontation with death made real by her father's frail body. Home as death or tomb figures in multiple ways: death of her former self, death of her father, death of her family, death of her future. Her surprise at the sight of her father suggests a reversal of expectations. Where she hoped for a new beginning, she finds only the end.

Glory's name bears this ironic reversal, a woman whose youthful glory of promise and potential has faded. She "had dreamed of a real home for herself and the babies, and the fiancé," but "she knew, she had known for years, that she would never open a door on that home, never cross that threshold, never scoop up a pretty child and set it on her hip and feel it lean into her breast and eye the world from her arms with the complacency of utter trust. Ah well" (102). The closest she ever comes to having a child of her own is Jack's daughter by Annie Wheeler. Glory brings the nameless child to the house one day to play as she makes an apple pie. But the

visit goes poorly, ends with a toppled baby and Annie telling her, “You just ain’t her mama. No use crying about it” (234). Glory still feels lingering guilt for the death of the baby, as if it were own child. Both Jack and Glory share the sense of being haunted by the shame of past failures and foolishness. It is this shame that ultimately eases the work of intimacy between them.

Her childhood home was the space of her happiest days, and now it serves only as a bitter reminder that those days have passed. The explanation she offers herself is that she is home out of duty, nothing more, and as soon as the duty is done she will leave. At least this is her initial plan. The question for Glory is whether she can shift her attitude toward home, to experience it not as a reminder of her failures but as a space of renewal, where the potentialities of her childhood—hope and happiness—might live again. But the past is a problematic idea. For Glory it seems to offer possibilities for redemption, customs and traditions that she might project into the future, filling her life with renewed purpose. Upon initial inspection, however, the past appears entirely unpromising. The narrative tracks a continuous dialectic between past happiness and present desolation, between old and new, with Boughton engaged by the former and Glory confronting the latter. The “glorious parade” of life in the Boughton family has since passed on, leaving behind the “confetti and candy wrappers” of “slight desolation” (4). What remains is a sense of belatedness, that everything beautiful and valuable took place in the past. Boughton remembers “Such times you had!” (4). He clings to the memories of a life-filled household, his seven children running about, his wife alive and well, and the daily satisfactions of purposeful work as a pastor.

As the novel progresses, Boughton’s reveries of the past grow expansive. He speaks of old Gilead and his grandmother gathering purslane (175). He is taking one last look back, but all of those happy memories are tainted by Jack’s absence. “But you were always off somewhere”

(175). One might say that the past is Boughton's home, the place where he retreats whenever he feels strong emotion, a response that may be due to an unnamed brain disease, perhaps Alzheimer's. His nostalgia, his Depression-era thrift, and his strong emotional association between the house and family, have left the house entirely unchanged. It less resembles a house than a museum—or a mausoleum. Glory watches Jack “put his hand on the shoulder of their mother's chair, touch the fringe on a lampshade, as if to confirm for himself that the uncanny persistence of half-forgotten objects, all in their old places, was not some trick of the mind. Nothing about that house ever did change, except to fade or scar or wear” (52). To Glory, “It seemed sometimes as if her father must have meant to preserve all this memory, this sheer power of sameness, so that when they came home, or when Jack came home, there would be no need to say anything. In terms of the place, they would all always have known everything” (88). Robinson associates the past with dense, heavy materiality, burdensome and unavoidable. Jack's homecoming is a confrontation with this past, and its absolute immovability suggests Boughton's desire to cling to the burdens of past transgression rather than release and forgive: “He had come to the last inch of his power to forgive, and there was Jack, still far beyond his reach” (56).

Meanwhile, Glory is all-too-present: “Why should this staunch and upright house seem to her so abandoned? So heartbroken?” (4). The house's appearance is disorderly, almost monstrous, how “the gardens and the shrubbery were disheveled,” how “the immense bramble of trumpet vines” covers the porch (4). The shabby, unkempt appearance suggests the isolation that has descended on the Boughton household, isolation from the rest of the family, the community, and national-political life, with only those green reminders of a former fecundity. It is a house no longer concerned with appearances, social acceptability, or projecting a sense of hospitality. And Glory can do nothing about it. The house “is oppressive in ways that could easily have been

changed” (40). The conditional perfect tense signals Glory’s initial interpretation of belatedness, that it is too late to renew the old house, though there is hope percolating under her turn toward change.

The Boughton house, we learn, has always had difficulty with hospitality and the welcoming of difference. This idea is first dramatized in an anecdote about the Boughton’s Communist neighbors. While Boughton’s welcoming of Glory is uncomplicated—she’s family—the welcoming of neighbors who hold radically opposed social, religious, and political views poses an ethical challenge, one analogous to the challenge of Boughton welcoming Jack. “For years a neighbor—they still called him Mr. Trotsky because Luke, home from college, had called him that—planted alfalfa on half of it, and her father sometimes tried to find words for his irritation about this” (8). The Boughton’s discomfort with otherness is suggested in the name for their neighbors. The “Trotskys” are reduced in all of their complexity to a single, threatening identity. The remembered presence of the Communist neighbors is one of the ways *Home* opens up to larger political, Cold War meanings: The acquisitive, capitalistic, Protestant Boughtons against the agrarian, agnostic “Trotskys.” The narrator refers to the ground between them as a “battlefield” (9). Glory remembers one of the skirmishes, when the children played fox and geese in the alfalfa field and ruined it. Seeing the opportunity for a heroic “Yes,” Boughton asks the children to apologize, but it doesn’t go as planned. Mrs. Trotsky accuses the children of being greedy with the unused land and their father tells “his foolish lies again and again while everywhere the poor suffer!” (11). Because their apology is met with rebuke, the children walk away and tell their parents what happened and the Boughton’s “tacitly ceded all claim” to the land, rather than have another confrontation (13). While the anecdote seems like a digression, it serves as a metaphor for Jack’s homecoming. His presence raises the questions of hospitality,

neighborliness, and the clash of religious difference. He too will seek forgiveness and be met with rebuke. It's another confrontation that ends in a kind of prolonged and painful stalemate. In a mirroring of Mrs. Trotsky, Boughton's desire for justice rather than mercy is partly responsible for his inability to accommodate Jack's difference.

Memories such as these come and go as Glory settles into life with her father. It is a lonely, silent life of cooking, housework, and light diversion, mostly to shield herself from the pain of her former life. Glory is constantly confronted with her status as a Boughton, her identity conceived in terms of her role within the family. Outside Gilead she may be an adult, but within the home she is "the baby of the family" (14). Coming home initiates a kind of infantilizing process for her. "It is as if I had a dream of adult life and woke up from it, still here in my parents' house" (19). She cries easily and is humiliated by her tears. "She thought how considerate it would have been of nature to allow the venting of feeling through the palm of a hand or even the sole of a foot" (15). Even though Glory is loyal to her family, fulfilling her pious duty to honor her father, she feels like an outsider. While all the other children have beauty or talent, her defining virtue is that she "took everything to heart" (14). Glory's tears, which seem to well up on every other page of *Home*, not only suggest her personal sorrow, but also her role as the chief witness of family misery. For much of the novel, she hovers around the condition of mourning. Like Lila, who attends the graves of Ames first wife and child, as well as Jack's abandoned, nameless child, Glory embodies the traditional, civilizing, specifically feminine work (in Robinson's world) of ritual mourning and remembering the dead.

The death of Jack's child weighs heaviest on her conscience, in part because it was the scene of her father's "deepest grief," though this may be a way Glory psychically deflects her own anger toward Jack, since she fantasizes about one day being a mother (18). (Ames' desire

for fatherhood and Glory's desire for motherhood make Jack's impregnation and abandonment of his daughter all the more devastating to them.) The repetition of the episode in *Gilead* and *Home* reinforces the idea that the episode is the moment of crisis for the Boughton family, when family unity was forever shattered. Jack's fall is the book's core moral atrocity: his selfishness, malice, sexual violence, and careless abandonment result in the entirely wasteful death of an infant. Jack's guilt and shame forces him into a twenty year exile. And Glory continues to brood about how her father handled the situation:

She had never heard her father say such hard words—the cruelty of it! the arrogance!—and she had never seen him brood and mutter for days at a time, as if he were absorbing the fact that some transgressions are beyond a mere mortal's capacity to forgive. How often those same hard, necessary words had come to her mind. (18)

She continues, like her father, to hold a strong judgment against Jack's behavior, thinking those same "hard, necessary words" against Jack's malice and pride. Ironically, since Glory is the youngest child and was still at home throughout the Jack fiasco, her mother and father's time of grief was a time of singular joy for her. "It embarrassed her to remember how happy she had been, those three bitter, urgent years until it all ended" (70). Through Jack's fall, Glory was promoted to a place of intimacy and approval with her parents. She became finally *visible*, her foremost desire. By default of being the last child at home, she was deemed the exceptional, love-worthy child. Now, upon Jack's return, Glory feels herself cast out, demoted, and her original resentment against Jack returns. *Home* is in part about what people do with their judgments, whether they allow them to harden into righteousness or release them through forgiveness. To free Jack from her judgment, Glory will have to separate herself from her

father's self-righteousness, a painful undertaking for someone whose identity is strongly shaped by filial loyalty and duty.

Glory finds release from remembrance and the suffocating atmosphere of the house in tending the garden outside. "When he sat on the porch in the afternoons she worked in the garden. Those hours passed pleasantly. She cleared out patches she could break up well enough to plant with peas and lettuce" (19). The garden, as a space, is most notable for its exclusion of Boughton. It simply isn't accessible to him. He's too old and sick to leave the porch. It's no wonder then that the garden becomes the meeting and bonding space for Jack and Glory. "After a few minutes there was Jack, standing in the sunlight at the edge of the garden, smoking a cigarette. He said, 'I thought maybe you could put me to work out here'" (59). It is a space of liberation from the house and from their father, a space which is the closest proxy to their former lives outside of Gilead. Robinson has used the garden image before, most notably in *Housekeeping*, and there are obvious Biblical allusions embedded in it. But perhaps more importantly, it serves as a motif that charts narrative time, as Glory breaks ground here and as the vegetables grow throughout. It also suggests a metaphor for Glory and Jack's relationship, which flourishes briefly and dies, as well as their tentative attempts to transplant themselves and put down roots in Gilead.

Glory was a schoolteacher of English literature. It was a vocation that came out of specific social and political circumstances. Perhaps she would have gone into the ministry, but that work was denied her by the church's patriarchal ideology. "Women were creatures of a second rank, however pious, however beloved, however honored" (20). Robinson is sensitive to conservative gender politics of 1950s Protestantism, how it routed women from power and relegated them to other fields. She challenges these politics mainly through a subtle irony,

allowing Glory to be the exemplar of Christian virtue rather than her prideful, stubborn, clerical father. It is with a kind of disappointment that Glory takes up teaching “Il Penseroso” and “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” But it turned out to be her vocation indeed. Sacred in its way: “Sometimes she felt a silence in the [class] room deeper than ordinary silence” (22). There are suggestions that teaching is what Glory will do once settled back in Gilead. Her father announces, “Teachers are always needed!” (66).

More importantly, her background as a reader of texts makes her an excellent reader of people. Glory’s description of her brother Teddy shows the workings of a subtle, sensitive, highly perceptive mind:

Teddy with his crisp hair and his groomed hands, his soft brown sweater and his tortoiseshell glasses. He was mild and reassuring in every way he could be, by nature, habit, and intention. There was something of the scent of rubbing alcohol about him, so faint that he must have known it suggested illness or emergency and have scrubbed it off as carefully as he could. That would account for the cologne he wore, his only departure from decorous simplicity. (256)

Writing of Glory’s attentiveness to others, and the importance of a specifically female perception in *Home*, Messud writes, “It is Glory whose observations—like John Ames’s in *Gilead*—capture, in Woolfian moments of being, the beauty of their lives” (“Witnesses”). Glory is the great interpreter of Jack. As she says, “the real text was Jack,” though he will push her interpretative abilities to their limits (45). One of his glances is described as “mild, unreadable,” and she will remain ignorant about much of Jack’s life, in particular the circumstances he confesses to Ames at the end of *Gilead*. She is deeply sensitive to the behavior of others, what it means, implies, suggests. And she is a great observer and endless interpreter, revising her previous impressions

with new behavioral information, never arriving at definite certainties, particularly about Jack who remains utterly other and strange. In her own meek way, she is analogous to one of Henry James' central observers, a Winterbourne or Strether, a "central intelligence" through which the narration of *Home* is focalized. The central drama is between father and son, but it is through an outsider, Glory, that this drama is understood, interpreted, and made meaningful.

Soon, the narrative leans away from Glory's internal life when she is thrust into a new role after Jack's letter arrives. She is no longer just the good daughter caring for her father. She becomes a mediator between her father and brother as well as an emissary for the house, as she delivers the message to Ames that Jack is coming. She is also forced back into her role as sister. She hopes "that Jack would not remember her as the least tolerable, the most officious, the least to be trusted of his brothers and sisters" (26). Instead, "she thought and hoped he might hardly remember her," so that she would be unburdened by her past, able to reinvent her identity as a sister before Jack's very eyes (26). She wants a fresh start because she cares about Jack's approval. But why should she care? Why does she need Jack's approval? One plausible reason is because she remembers him as the older brother who ignored her, and she has never released her girlhood desire to be recognized and loved by him. The meaning of family in the Boughton household is synonymous with care, kindness, and love for ones siblings and parents. It is the family script. Once he arrives, Glory's role is solidified: She will accept Jack and be kind toward him. This is experienced as relief: "At least I know what is required of me now, and that is something to be grateful for" (33).

Yet Glory's feelings toward Jack are complicated. She both desires approval and resents the emotional toll he exacts on her father: "What right do you have! she stormed inwardly, knowing as she did that her father's only prayers were that Jack would come, and that Jack

would stay” (29). It is also possible to read a degree of jealousy into Glory’s protection of her father. She wants Boughton to herself, never admitting to a resentment that stems from being the dutiful, caring daughter and receiving little of her father’s tender attention compared to his obsessive solicitude for the prodigal Jack. The model daughter, Glory is made to seem invisible, blocked from her father’s loving gaze by the son whose value has always rested in his estrangement and transgressions.

Jack arrives in Gilead hung over and unshaven, weary, pale, and thin. Glory describes him as “distant and respectful and tentative” (31). An outsider, Jack is deeply uncomfortable at home, so much so that he asks permission to enter as if he were a stranger, even though, paradoxically, he enters through the kitchen door, a space of familiarity. For Jack, home is the space he always avoided—he was always a stranger at home, never happy there—and coming back to Gilead offers him the possibility to finally be at home, to find release from his exilic past. Neither Glory nor Jack experience home as a space of rest, peace, refuge, hope, or security—at least at first. What they share is the experience of home-loss—betrayal for Glory and domestic crisis for Jack. Glory asks, “Has it ever, ever occurred to you that you are not the only miserable person in this house?” (138). Jack and Glory both occupy a “miserable” condition—disappointed and disillusioned—and a desire to find some release from that condition. Ironically, it is Glory, the one who strongly believes Gilead can never be home again, who eventually finds home there. And it is Jack, who desires Gilead to be home, who finds his essential homelessness deepened. In this way, Jack occupies a similar role as Sylvie in *Housekeeping*, an outsider inserted back into the community of their youth, whose life has never conformed to the moral codes imposed upon them by that community. They are both misfits. They are both estranged and familiar, at once a part of the community—remembered by them—

but also utterly separated due to his exile. This doubleness, both within and without community, both free and entrapped, both an exile and at home, is woven into Jack's ironic character.

"That's how he was, all respectfulness and good manners when he knew he ought to have been in trouble" (33).

When he meets his father after twenty years apart, he calls him "Sir" and tries to shake his hand. But Boughton puts down his cane and embraces him. "'We have worried so much, so much. And here you are'" (32). The gestures are significant. Boughton's embrace signals his desire to play the role of the father of the prodigal son, welcoming and forgiving. Jack's handshake suggests a business-like formality, a denial of the filial (defined in Boughton terms). This is the same handshake that his father will deny him before he leaves, as Boughton is by then too weak, frustrated, and weary to get up from his chair, let alone embrace his son. The language of greeting is also telling. What Jack means to Boughton is unrelenting anxiety: "so much, so much." This is an element of Jack's guilt and shame, part of the reason for his characteristic gesture of putting his hand to his face, his sensitivity to the debt-debtor relation, and his habits of obsessive cleanliness: "His hands were greasy, so he went to the sink and washed them, and washed his face, then he took a dishcloth and wiped down the telephone" (81). Along with Jack's hand to his face, he also laughs, not at any particularly funny, but as part of his ironic repertoire, to create distance between his speech and self. His fall and exile has inflicted severe emotional and spiritual damage upon his father, about which Boughton will remind Jack from the start of his homecoming to the end. And there seems nothing Jack's presence can do to redeem it. He can only repeat the phrase that comes most readily to his lips: "I'm sorry."

The relationship between Jack and Glory begins tentatively. She is curious about him, taking note of every gesture, the way he transforms the bedroom. But her curiosity is

constrained by Midwestern propriety, her culture's fierce devotion to individual privacy, the Boughton worship of tact, and also by 1950s gender norms, which say that a woman should not pry into the life of a man, even if he is one's brother. While Glory would like to know everything about Jack, she's forced by moral conventions to keep verbal exchanges polite and padded with pleasantries:

“I brought you some towels.”

“Thank you very much. You're very kind.”

“I hope you're comfortable,” she said.

“I am. Thank you.” (36)

Robinson's exploration of Midwestern moral codes in *Gilead* and *Home* helps explain her attraction toward setting her novels in the recent past. It is not simply that she is interested in American religious cultures, something that would be difficult to represent in contemporary terms without risking the dangers of “relevance,” “immediacy,” or “being topical.” Like many recent novelists, Toni Morrison comes to mind, Robinson prefers settings which establish distance between the reader and the narrative, in order to gain the effect of a different, unfamiliar world.

The Midwest of the 1950's is another world. It's a quaint culture of porch conversation, church, and board games, untouched by urbanity, eccentricity, or sensuousness. It's a place where little gestures of honor are still obeyed, standing to greet a woman, the privilege of saying grace before meals, certain table manners: “Waiting to speak until they were spoken to, until the meal was finished, out of respect to talk of creeds and synods” (39). Their pride is humility, simplicity, piety, and usefulness. There are no mentions of divorces or infidelities. It's a culture of northern European immigrants, few of whom have any experience with other races, cultures.

For Boughton, a trip to Minneapolis is “his closest equivalent to foreign travel” (219). The dominant emotion is a gentle Midwestern stoicism. Easy smiles mask stern, Calvinist interiors. It’s a culture that excludes sentimentality, subdues anxiety with propriety, and suppresses wild, tempestuous emotions of the romantic or erotic. Robinson never sets out to judge this culture, but rather to explore the lives of characters inhabiting it. The moral codes they obey stipulate what can and can’t be said. It is particularly strange—and dramatically interesting—that neither Glory nor Boughton feel it is appropriate to ask Jack the most obvious question: Why has he returned home? The code’s mandated silence allows Robinson to slowly inflate the mystery of his presence, until it becomes so large that Boughton must violate the code and address it—but only in the most indirect, tactful way. The moral code also allows Robinson to maintain dramatic irony in every exchange of dialog. It gives her what Frye says all novelists need, “the framework of a stable society” (305). Because of our access to Glory’s consciousness, the reader always knows that the speakers are concealing their desires behind a mask of conventional propriety and decency. Robinson invites us to contemplate how these characters dwell within these codes, for good and ill, rather than viewing them as oppressive or repressive.

Jack is the master of the moral codes, having perfected the art of Midwestern “kindness.” But the reader has a persistent sense that Jack’s politeness is entirely insincere, the result of mastering a complicated game of appearances. Jack plays the game so well because he has the most to hide. He has learned to deflect the gaze of judgment away from himself by mirroring back the language and behavior of appropriate manners. It’s a skill he acquired at an early age. “Jack, can you tell me why you have done whatever you did, acted however you did? No, sir. You can’t explain it, Jack? No, sir. That courtesy was his shield and concealment. It was his courage” (64). In fact, he’s ironically aware of his own manipulation of appearances. In the

letter he writes to Della he “‘dropped a tear where I had signed my name. It was tap water, really, but the thought is what counts’” (122). Robinson shows how codes of morality both embed positive normative values like kindness and are vulnerable to abuse by skilled ironists like Jack whose appearance of “‘kindness’” blocks any real kindness from being exchanged. Glory notes, with characteristic intelligence, “‘that thank-you of his. It was so unflinching as to be impersonal, or at least to have no reference to any particular kindness, as if he had trained himself to note the mere fact of kindness, however slight any instance of it might be’” (46).

With Jack home, the space of the house changes. The atmosphere becomes almost purgatorial in the sense that Glory and Jack’s primary activity is waiting. Jack waits for a letter from Della. Glory waits on Jack and Boughton. And the rest of the family and Ames’ family anxiously wait for the final collapse of Boughton’s health. Perhaps “‘purgatorial’” isn’t the right word, since these are Presbyterians. Glory offers another formulation of her time with Jack, “‘as if they’d been whiling away perdition together, telling tales of what got them there, to forestall tedium and the dread of what might come next’” (307).

Despite Jack’s slender build, quiet habits, and essential hidden-ness, he is a huge, overwhelming presence in the house. Glory feels herself being squeezed to the margins—most painfully, the margins of her father’s attention. And she resents it: “‘What right did [Jack] have to take over the house this way?’” (67). In this formulation, Jack is the intruder, the stranger, occupying a space of which he has no right. Glory’s hospitality has the ironic effect of putting herself out of home: “‘I believe I’ll go out for a little walk’” (67).

While Jack and Glory have their cautiously polite interactions, Glory spends her solitude brooding. Her prayers are embittered, sorrowful: “‘Lord, my brother treats me like a hostile stranger, my father seems to have put me aside, I feel I have no place here in what I

thought would be my refuge, I am miserable and bitter at heart, and old fears are rising up in me so that everything I do makes everything worse” (69). Long passages of interior dialog—Glory’s conversation with herself—begin to appear:

Did she choose to be there, in that house, in Gilead? No, she certainly did not. Her father needed looking after, and she had to be somewhere, like every other human being on earth. What an embarrassment that was, being somewhere because there was nowhere else for you to be. All those years of work and nothing to show for it. But you make the best of things. People respect that. It is a blessing to know what is being asked of you. And how can this man drift in from nowhere, take a room in the house and a place at the table, and make her feel she was there on sufferance? Though in fact there was no presumption, only deference and reluctance, in his manner. Clearly he, too, did not choose to be there. She found it a little annoying how obvious that was. Of course there was nothing remarkable in the fact of a grown man wanting one room to call his own, especially since he was almost a stranger in the house. Since he was also a member of the family. (37)

Although it is Robinson’s first novel written in the third-person, she continues to allow ample space for inwardness—reflection, speculation, contemplation. It is Robinson characteristic way of developing character: identity is thought and behavior. Henry James thought similarly about people, and passages like this are indebted to his singular focus on interiority. Through these moments the reader begins to “know” Glory, her characteristic way of processing experience, the modulating tones of her consciousness. There is bitterness and resentment (“No, she certainly did not.”), shame and disappointment (“All those years of work and nothing to show for it”), a meager attempt at self-assurance (“But you make the best of things”—Robinson uses a cliché to

show that Glory might not believe herself), a return to anger and resentment (“And how can this man drift in from nowhere, take a room in the house and a place at the table, and make her feel she was there on sufferance?”), sympathy quickly followed by irritation (“Clearly he, too, did not choose to be there. She found it a little annoying how obvious that was”), and, setting emotion aside, she concludes reasonably (“Of course there was nothing remarkable in the fact of a grown man wanting one room to call his own, especially since he was almost a stranger in the house”). Over the course of the narrative, these tones are constantly jostled and rearranged around shifting circumstances and increasing intimacy with Jack. By the end, sympathy and self-assurance have crowded out the anger and humiliation of what Glory initially believes is the failure of her life.

It is important to note, however, that such passages of interior experience do not dominate the narrative space. Unlike Henry James, particularly in his late phase, Robinson is content to sample Glory’s consciousness in *brief* revelations, only to return to the realities of action and nature. The next sentence in the passage above is: “She went out to the garden,” followed by a description of sun and squash. *Home* is actually less introspective than either of her previous two novels. It is the most other-focused of her books, less concerned with self-knowledge than the limitations of knowing other people. Glory simply has less time for contemplation than either Ruth or Ames, busy as she is with her role as caretaker and homemaker.

Glory’s interior moments are balanced by the representation of the material world. Dishes, towels, furniture, vegetables, there are reminders of materiality are present on every page, with one important exception—bodies. Robinson remains reticent about direct descriptions of corporality, forcing readers to invent bodies and faces for each of the characters. It is very difficult to visualize Glory’s face, let alone Boughton’s old body. The reader knows

that Boughton wears heavy shoes, carries a cane, and sits in a Morris chair. But we never learn *how* he smiles or *how* he holds hands during grace. While Robinson has never written so much dialogue, she makes no effort to connect speech with movements of the mouth and tongue.

This may have something to do with the Biblical influence on Robinson's writing. *Home* is woven through with motifs and themes from across the scripture: Jacob and Esau, Cain and Abel, the Last Supper. Glory quotes the prophet Isaiah as she watches Jack leave, which imagines him as a kind of Christ-figure: "A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their face" (318). Of course, many allusions about Jack fall outside the Bible. Glory calls his charming, dapper side "Cary Grant," his darker, criminal side "Raskolnikov" (131). But then Robinson will return to scripture, framing Jack as a "thief," which has obvious Christian resonances, the thief on the cross and Augustine's famous theft of the pears in his *Confessions*. It is a kind of paradigmatic sin within the tradition, but also associated with paradigmatic examples of forgiveness and redemption. Later on, Jack alludes to himself as Lazarus. The allusion is ambiguous: Is he raised from the dead because he resembles his father—Boughton's youth resurrected? Or is Jack Lazarus since he's been "dead" for twenty years in exile? Later on, Robinson elaborates on this allusion. "Jack had walked in on a potent thought of himself, like Lazarus with the memory of ceremonies about him no matter how often he might shave or comb his hair" (240). The stain on his shirt, the splinter in his hand, and his symbolic "cerements" mark his identity with the ideas of "Transgression. Dishonor. Unmet obligation" (240). But more than content, Robinson is also stylistically indebted to the Bible insofar as her prose is reduced, concise, omitting the kinds of dense physical description that is characteristic of the novel's realist tradition.

What matters is how objects, behavior, and speech reveal and conceal interiority, primarily emotions and attitudes. There is a moment, when Glory is thinking about characteristic Boughton features, that reads almost like a satire on the novelistic convention of revealing character through facial descriptions. Considering the prominent brows of the Boughton clan, she remembers, “Their grandfather had once happened upon a phrenologist who found, in the weighty pediment of brow resting upon the tottered pillar of his nose, so much to praise that over the next few months he had dabbled in metaphysics and even considered running for public office” (43). Faces, in Robinson, are left to the reader’s imagination, precisely because to believe that they reveal character is to believe in a pseudo-science like phrenology.

Whatever her appearance, Glory does her tactful best to create a semblance of home for Boughton and Jack. But despite her diligent efforts of cooking, gardening, and cleaning, she can never labor enough to erase the past, which is made repeatedly present in the old house. Even something as innocent as where she decides to serve dinner triggers unexpected memories: “Twenty years before, they had had a quiet conversation in that room [about the pregnant girl]. She should have thought of that. She should have served dinner in the kitchen” (40). While her labor of cooking is successful, her labor to promote the emotional health of the house, her unacknowledged desire to assist in the reconciliation of father and son, is a miserable failure.

What Jack and Boughton cannot achieve is harmonious communication, as any mention of the past only conjures up pain. Their meals together are strained by forced conversation. “It was hard work talking to Jack. So little in his childhood and youth could be mentioned without discomfort, his twenty-year silence was his to speak about if he chose to, but they were prepared to appreciate his discretion if any account of it might have caused more discomfort still” (63). Language remains too deeply bound with memory, and memory with pain. The men share a

great deal, a surname and a tall, lanky frame. Indeed, Jack looks like Boughton in his prime, “except for the marked weariness of his face, his mild and uninnocent expression” (180).

Despite their difference in age, Glory makes the connection that they both seem close to death. “He was the measure of the failure of his father’s body, and also perhaps a portending of the failure of his own” (180). Yet, even with so much in common, they cannot speak openly with one another.

Robinson figures this disjunction in the motif of naming. Jack’s real name is John, and at some point he went by Johnny, then he landed forever on Jack. Glory wonders “when did he begin to insist on that name?” (45). The importance of names in *Gilead* and *Home* is perhaps more directly indebted to the importance of names in the Bible, particularly to those examples of name changes: Abram to Abraham, Saul to Paul. For his father, Jack uses the formal “sir.” “It’s always “sir,” isn’t it? Never Papa. Or Dad. Some of the others call me Dad now, some of the boys do” (90). Of course, when Jack calls him “Dad,” Boughton reacts harshly: “Don’t call me that...I don’t like it at all. Dad. It sounds ridiculous. It’s not even a word” (272). Boughton can’t accept Jack’s name for him, despite it being the name Jack’s brothers use. By disallowing “Dad,” Boughton separates Jack from the rest of his brothers. When Boughton says, “You’ve never had a name for me. Not one you’d call me to my face. Why is that?” Jack replies, “They all seemed wrong when I said them. I didn’t deserve to speak to you the way the others did” (311). The reader knows it is not simply Jack’s fault that all his names for his father fail. He does try them but they are never welcomed. Boughton’s desire for a name—“That was what I waited for. That was what I wanted”—contains a blindness toward his own refusal of Jack’s attempts at naming (311).

While Jack and Glory's conversation increases in fluidity and ease, Jack and Boughton's remains stilted, one-sided, and often unintentionally harmful. The awareness of the potential harm is so great that before Boughton begins a particularly direct inquiry into Jack's past he says, "You're probably going to have to forgive me for this" (114). But the mystery of Jack's motivation for being the family misfit, and his present-day misery, is never illuminated, as if merely inquiring about Jack's life produces more grief and distance. Jack asks, "What can I do—I mean, is there something I can do now?" Boughton replies, "Not a thing to be done. I'm sorry I brought it up" (116).

Part of the problem lies in Boughton's valorization of "family" as a supreme value. It has an obvious positive charge, for "it is in family that we most often feel the grace of God" (183). Family is where Boughton found value and worth and his identity as a father. One might say he idolizes the institution, perhaps even more than his profession. The meaning of family rests in its codification of special obligations and responsibilities, such that even members of the family Boughton has never met place special demands on him, such as Jack's child, Della, and his son. His values of family honor, decency, and loyalty won't be comprised, even if they potentially threaten Jack's life. As Glory knows, "Fealty to kin, actual and imagined, and the protection of them, possible or not, were their father's pride, his strongest instinct, and his chief source of satisfaction, frustration, and anxiety" (236). He tells Jack, "Your obligations are your problem if you can meet them. If not, they become my problem. Things must be seen to. It's only decent" (236). The dark side to the valuation of family is the harm it causes. Boughton's praise of family only works to remind Jack of the abandonment of his daughter, not to mention Glory's disappointment at not having a family (183).

The conflict between Jack and Boughton can be understood as a conflict about loyalty. Boughton's attempt to understand "why you didn't love us" is a question of loyalty (273). It's a theme of the Prodigal Son, of course, but it also harkens back to the problem of family loyalty in the Book of Ruth and *Housekeeping*, as Ruth and Lucille have to decide whether to be loyal to Sylvie or not. Boughton's loyalty is to family; it is his "pride, his strongest instinct" (236). Jack denies this instinct, denies the value of "fealty to kin" all together, a denial embodied in his abandonment of Annie Wheeler and his daughter. Jack's loyalty is essentially to himself, over and against the Boughton clan. This is what is impossible for Boughton to understand and forgive: the total absence in Jack of family loyalty. As Glory says, "He had eaten their food and slept beneath their roof, wearing the clothes and speaking the dialect of their slightly self-enamored and distinctly clerical family and, for all they knew, intending no parody even when he was old enough to have been capable of it, and to have been suspected of it. A foundling, she thought" (248). Of course, this is not exactly true. Jack is loyal to *his* family—Della and Robert. That's why he's in Gilead, out of sense of responsibility to find a new home for them. Boughton is blind to this because the reality of Jack's scandal—marriage to a black woman—upsets his middle-class, white, Protestant morality.

The problem is that Boughton cannot relinquish his need to *know* the underlying cause of Jack's disastrous life. The separation between father and son is never more stark than when Boughton attempts to "solve" the enigma of Jack. He wants to finally "see" Jack, but as he says of a dream, "I could never get a clear look at you" (139). In a tense conference between them, he announces, "I've given it a lot of thought, and I feel I know what is troubling you, Jack" (152). The answer is preposterously mistaken: "I should have baptized her [Jack's daughter]. I have regretted many times I didn't do at least that much for her" (152). Not only is this

decidedly not what troubles Jack, it is further proof that his father knows little about him.

Lodged in his own clerical understandings of the world, Boughton has projected his anxieties

onto a sacrament, even to the point of bending doctrine. Glory attests his idea is rather un-

Presbyterian: “We don’t believe in the necessity of baptism. You’ve always said that” (152).

Boughton’s intentions are clearly noble—to take onto himself the burden of Jack’s guilt. But the execution goes awry, and it’s impossible for Jack to see how his father is responsible in any way.

Jack believes, “It was all my fault” (153).

One might say that Boughton desires to possess Jack, to claim him as his own, which is why Jack’s frequent reenactments of his twenty year exile, slipping out of the house on mysterious errands, cause him so much anxiety. “And here [Jack] is again, leaving the house for an hour, and by the end of it the old man is too anxious to sit still and she is prowling in his room, intruding on his privacy” (65). “If I had it all to do over again,” Jack explains, “I mean adolescent criminality, I’d try to restrict myself to doing things that were explicable...It’s the things people can’t account for that upset them” (202). Boughton’s refusal to acknowledge Jack’s otherness, and his dogged, anxious quest to “know” the “real” Jack, has the effect of denying Jack his individuality and personhood. Boughton’s blindness to and anxiety around the limitations of knowledge means that he persists in the illusion that other people are intelligible, an ultimately harmful illusion. Boughton’s epistemological stance is contrasted with Glory’s ethical approach to Jack. Hers is not a quest to “know” or “understand” him but simply to be “kind,” “accepting,” and “generous” through simple domestic deeds: pouring him coffee, ironing his shirts, encouraging him to eat more. Glory’s restraint from judgment is posited as virtue, enabling her to care for Jack’s basic, material needs, and allowing for a flourishing of intimacy between them.

Robinson explores in microscopic detail Glory's ethical work of intimacy. The smallest gestures, the most minuscule kindnesses are what ultimately makes or breaks the feeling of home. Glory's creation of home for Jack means having a generous interpretation of his intentions, of believing and trusting that he is not trying to intentionally harm or dismiss her. Here is Glory in the act of interpretation: "It had occurred to her more than once that his thank you had the effect of ending conversation. He might not intend it that way. And just now, when the conversation had gone reasonably well, she decided not to take it that way" (47). And again, when Jack calls her "poor kid," she thinks, "She resented the condescension in 'poor kid.' But brothers condescend to their sisters. It is a sign of affection" (51). Glory blushes with shame when Jack reads her horoscope—"Curiosity is not always welcome. Consider self-restraint"—but she thinks, "Maybe the horoscope was real after all. She decided it was better to assume it was real" (67). By the time Jack laughs at her announcement that she was never married, Glory has adapted to Jack's seeming unkindness, accepting that about him, and refusing to take offense. At one level, these moments are symptoms of her desire for Jack's approval. "The unwelcome realization came to her that she loved Jack and yearned for his approval" (69). But for the reader, Glory's work of generous interpretation is as close as *Home* comes to an embodiment of heroism. It is an everyday, ordinary kind of heroism, but its implications are profound for intimacy, trust, and community formation. It is the same principle of generosity that animates Robinson's essays on cultural history. One aspect of "modern culture" that Robinson excavates is what she sees as our tendency to always interpret intentions in as dark and pessimistic light as possible. Robinson is not suggesting that we can ever know with certainty what the other intends—that is always a mystery. And very often our interpretations will be deeply wrong, as numerous interpretations are in *Home*. What we know of other's intentions is

always a matter of belief. And the content of those beliefs, be they generous or cynical, will either permit relatedness or harden separateness.

The only way Jack and Boughton are able to relate is through Jack's dutiful action. "A tacit agreement had formed between the two men that Jack would help his father with the bathing and changing that had been the uneasiest part of her caring for him" (68). For the most part, Jack's solicitude is warmly received by Boughton, and because Glory is excluded from this interaction, the reader assumes it is part of the work of reconciliation. There are, however, limits to these gestures. Jack carries his father to bed one morning, a scene that Glory finds beautiful, except that Jack acted without considering Boughton's pride. Boughton recoils at the humiliating role-reversal of a son carrying a father. "You just picked me up and carried me, didn't you, Jack. Well, that's all right. I'm not the father you remember, I know that" (74). What was intended as kindness ends in humiliation.

This is a good example of the irony of intention, one of Robinson's chief preoccupations in *Home*, how a favor kindly meant can be received as harm. It is an ancient concern in Western culture. Paul mentions it in Romans, "for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (*King James Version*, Rom. 7.15). It's there in Horatio's speech at the end of *Hamlet*: "purposes mistook/Fall'n on th' inventors' heads" (5.2.367-368). Eliot's lines in the *Four Quartets* are also to the point: "the shame/Of motives late revealed, and the awareness/Of things ill done and done to others' harm/Which once you took for exercise of virtue" (142). The trouble that Robinson finds in this Midwestern culture of well-intentioned do-gooders, always ready for heroic forgiveness, is the dogged persistence of harm and damage. *Home* offers many examples of this kind of irony. About Boughton: "There was from time to time a tone of rebuke in his voice that overrode the mildness of his intentions" (84). About Annie Wheeler:

She was a hard, proud, unsmiling girl, and she may well have hated them all for their benevolent intentions, which were indeed condescending, reflecting as they did their awareness that her circumstances could be improved, that she might benefit from being gently instructed in the proper care of an infant even though this would involve overruling her mother. (233)

It is as if Robinson is astonished by this capacity to do harm. Robinson is actually far less interested in the kinds of inevitable suffering that come with old age. Boughton's frail body is mostly placed off-stage. We never see Glory changing Boughton's underwear or bathing him. She only mentions that it is "difficult." The more private, difficult, shameful experiences of caring for a dying parent are left to our imagination. This is because such raw bodily scenes would detract from Robinson's main subject, the ethics of harm and forgiveness, which she asks readers to understand in theological terms. The idea that Robinson interprets Calvin's "fallen state" of humanity in epistemological terms in her essays—that human knowledge is conditioned by finitude—is placed into social-ethical terms in *Home*. "Sin" might be defined as meaning well and doing harm. It's woven into social relations, unable to be dislodged by any human will, a mysterious, almost metaphysical reality. "Grace" is that rare, holy moment of meaning well and doing well, which occurs by a strange harmony of intention, action, and receptivity, such as when Glory buys new clothes for Jack and for whatever reason he receives them gladly.

Although this ethical and interpersonal theme of harm and forgiveness dominates *Home*, Robinson does not neglect the political. Gilead feels isolated from the rest of the country, and the Boughton house an island within that isolation, but Robinson makes certain that it is a community embedded within the larger community of the nation. In fact, it is Jack's presence that drags political discourse into the house, as if his outsider status forces Boughton to

acknowledge his relationship to wider communities. Their first dinner together begins: “I believe the threat of atomic war is very real!” (42). This Cold War context arrives in Gilead through the media—“*Time* and *Life* and *Post*”—which augments the atmosphere of anxiety and struggle between Boughton and Jack (45). Glory admits to an interest in Marxism and Jack brings her home a copy of Friedrich Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (140). Marxist ideas are never really weighed or considered. Rather they are floated as cultural markers and means for developing character, for example, Jack’s enthusiasm for political and social theory and his wariness around religion. The political context more immediately relevant to Jack, however, is the emerging Civil Rights movement. *Home* is obliquely a meditation on race in America.

Jack’s interest in race relations is immediately apparent. He’s seen reading W.E.B. DuBois, and he’s found by Glory standing outside a hardware store watching the TV footage of the bus boycott riots in Montgomery (47). The introduction of television into the Boughton home, with its evening news of Montgomery’s police dogs and fire hoses, forces political confrontation between father and son. Where Jack is appalled, Boughton is indifferent. He says, “There’s no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it” (97). Boughton, born and raised in white Gilead, only knows about the plight of American blacks through the media, which helps construct his point of view. The tragedy of Emmett Till is a vague, mistaken memory: “Wasn’t he the Negro fellow that—attacked the white woman?” (156). After explaining the tragedy, Jack rather passively offers, “We read different newspapers” (156). Behind this mention of the politics of media is Jack’s lived experience with a black woman, the reality that becomes more and more unmentionable as Boughton’s views on race become clearer. In this initial encounter, their conflicting opinions on

Civil Rights never surface. Instead, Boughton clings to Jack's transgression—his exclamation, "Jesus!"—and punishes Jack by refusing his help standing up. Robinson furthers the theme of race when Jack reads *Something of Value* to his father, a novel about the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. Boughton shuts down the entire question of racial conflict the novel raises: "So much bad blood. I think we had all better just keep to ourselves" (147). The comment touches on Jack's interracial marriage, but instead of talking about that, Boughton naps and mentions the descriptions of "the elephants were very interesting" (147). Boughton does have opinions about the status of African-Americans, but like everything else he is a proud moralist: "I have nothing against the colored people. I do think they're going to need to improve themselves, though, if they want to be accepted. I believe that is the only solution" (155). He views the Civil Rights movement through his values of order and respectability: "The colored people appear to me to be creating problems and obstacles for themselves with all this—commotion" (156). He is blind to the political dimension of race and blatant violations of justice. In case there was any question about Jack's politics his remark about discrimination in baseball is telling: "You have to be black to have no chance at all" (200). Like every point of conflict between Jack and Boughton, their differing views on race end in stalemate. When Jack says, "The protest in Montgomery are non-violent," the old man replies, "But they provoke violence. It's all provocation" (204).

As the conflict with Boughton deepens, *Home* expands the theme of Jack's alienation, from his family, from the community, and perhaps most essentially from himself. It is not just that Boughton cannot forgive Jack. It's that Jack can't forgive himself. "You can forgive yourself," he asks Glory. "Yes I can," she says. Jack's self-concealing reply is "Interesting" (120). We listen to him say, "I'm so tired of myself" and "I offend me—eyes, hands, history, prospects—" (172-174). His irony is really a product of self-obsession. Like Hamlet, Jack is

obsessed with the line between appearance and reality, social masks and the authentic self. Also like Hamlet, he seems desperately alone and full of self-loathing, another melancholy modern man. Except unlike the Prince of Denmark, Jack shows a capacity to love others—his narcissism has limits. He clearly loves Della and his father. The only problem is that these affections are not reciprocated, and when they finally are, by Della, it is too late.

Forgiveness is the major theological concept in *Gilead* and *Home*. Indeed, there is a noticeable absence in her fiction and non-fiction of concepts such as salvation, justification, or sanctification. Robinson elevates forgiveness, alongside her other key theological concept, Creation, to a preeminent status: “Then there were grace and forgiveness to compensate, to put things right, and these were the greatest goodness of God after creation itself, so far as we mortals can know” (110). Sometimes harm is the victor, sometimes forgiveness, but most often it’s something in-between, partial harm, partial forgiveness. Glory claims that Jack’s “really not so hard to forgive” (191). What she can’t admit is that there may be a limit to forgiveness, she doesn’t “know how much [Della’s] had to forgive” (191). Ames seems to agree. In his conversation about predestination, his usual position is “that the gravity of sin could not be gainsaid” (221). Jack seeks forgiveness from Boughton, Della, Ames, Glory, and himself. Every relationship is characterized by harm already done, as if his existence was harmful. “It’s what I am, as much as anything” (193). Could Glory forgive her fiancé? (193). That harm is part of what she’s clinging to. She’s unable to release past injury, like Boughton. A new orientation toward her past slowly dawns on her. Perhaps the fraudulence and hurt of being engaged to a married man doesn’t mean *only* harm and betrayal. Perhaps it was: “Sacred, she thought. Strange to think of it that way” (209). She also begins resent Della, for the harm she’s doing Jack in not replying to his letters. “Whoever Della was, she knew him too well to treat

him this way. She could ignore his letters if she wanted to. But this was cruelty” (228). For Robinson, the meaning of all human experience is sacred, including suffering. This perspective allows Glory to be released from her past.

The emphasis on forgiveness places the moral burden on individual conscience, which situates Robinson in the recognizably Protestant intellectual lineage of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Kierkegaard, those that argued the *individual's*—as opposed to the collectives—experience of guilt and repentance is at the center of Christian experience. It's the question of Jack's "soul": "She should ask Jack what a soul is, since he seemed to feel the presence of a soul. Cankered, perhaps, but that was what gave him his awareness of it" (112). Jack asks, "Say you do something terrible. And it's done. And you can't change it. Then how do you live the rest of your life? What do you say about it?" (99). Glory replies, "All I can tell you is what Papa would say. He'd say repent, and then—you can put it aside, more or less, and go on" (99). But in Robinson's fiction the movement of guilt and forgiveness is not figured in a relationship between humans and the divine, as it is, say, in John Donne's *Holy Sonnets*. Primarily it is located between humans, framed entirely by human experience. It's an understanding of the sanctity of the everyday that Robinson finds reflected in the Bible's this-worldliness: "How oddly holiness situated itself among the things of the world" (102). Robinson's project in *Home* is to humanize theological themes. In so doing, she questions the dualism of the imminent-transcendent divide, asking whether there is a meaningful difference between a father-son relation and a divine-human relation.

Jack finds himself alienated from the rest of his family as well. A good example is his brother Teddy. His older brother Teddy did all of his homework in college, and even spent time scouring the St. Louis in search of his errant brother. Teddy is the son who made good, a doctor

who is loyal to his father and family. Once Teddy arrives, Jack has one final desperate push of desire, to somehow put his father's mind at ease about the state of his soul (264). At first, Teddy seems to be a *deus ex machina*, a doctor whose presence seems to portend the healing of Jack and Boughton. But Jack knows it won't happen. "That last time I spoke to him, before I left, I knew I had done something he couldn't forgive. He thought he could. He said he had, but he's a terrible liar" (277).

Jack's relationship to society around him is also vexed. Not only can Jack not feel comfortable at home, the community has retained the memory of his childhood antics. When a local paper reports a "rash of burglaries," Jack senses an accusatory silence whenever he's in public. He is so aware of the perceptions of others that he has something like a persecution complex. Paranoia and anxiety worsen the longer he stays. The word "hell" begins to appear: "Jack Boughton is in hell over nothing at all" (142). Rather than checking out a library book by Engels, he decides it's less risky to "borrow" it: "Here I am trying to rehabilitate myself, as they say, to cut a moderately respectable figure in this town. So [checking out the book] seemed out of the question" (141). For Robinson, the idea of home is not confined to the physical structure of the house. She has a communal understanding: homes are always found in neighborhoods. Jack is unable to find home both within his childhood house and the larger community of Gilead. Jack is a kind of triple exile, a stranger at home, in community, and, because of his marriage to Della, within the nation-state.

The only force assuaging this condition is Glory's kindness. The difficult work of befriending Jack pays off, and Glory feels comfortable enough to stop "avoiding ordinary contact with people" (95). As their intimacy increases, Jack's bedrock spiritual problems are exposed, his "spiritual hunger" as he ironically calls it (104). By persisting in kindness, Glory earns

Jack's trust, allowing more to dimensions of his character to appear: he plays music, speaks competent French, has a "lady friend" named Della, muses about trying to settle down in Gilead. They exchange confessions—Jack didn't finish college; Glory never married—and eventually reach the subject of their failed love lives. Glory's former fiancé remains unnamed, as if he and his betrayal are too painful to bring to consciousness. The trust between them reaches its apex when she buys clothes for Jack:

Why hadn't she bought clothes for him weeks ago? Because he was a stranger she was afraid of offending with so personal an attention. Because her buying clothes for him would allude to his poverty and offend him. Because it might seem like a subject of conversation for people who saw her buying them and this would embarrass and offend him. Because he was vain, and particular, and Jack. Cheap, sturdy work clothes were not the kind of thing he thought he should wear, and they would offend him. But in fact she saw him check the shirts on the line several times, and when one of them was dry enough, he brought it in and ironed it and put it on. The pants were heavier and took longer to dry. She saw him check them, too, then walk over by the orchard, pick a fallen apple off the ground, throw it up on the barn roof, and wait and catch it when it came down, and throw it again. Her brothers all did that when they were boys. Jack looked a little stiff, as if he were making an experiment in attempting this lonely game after so many years. Tentative as he was, it might have meant happiness. (194)

Always aware of the multiple interpretative possibilities encoded in any behavior, no matter how well-intentioned in appearance, Glory decides to put her hesitations aside and risk direct generosity toward Jack. The offer is made—a free gift, like grace—and the beauty of the moment is that it appears Jack accepts it, rather than feeling shamed by it. Of course, Glory

can't know the spirit of Jack's acceptance. The last sentence is full of uncertainty: "Tentative," "might." But something appears to have changed. The new clothes may image rebirth, held in tension with the apple of Jack's fallen past.

Glory's gift does inspire Jack for a time. He cleans his suit with gasoline, and "it did look to her as if it had fewer of the signs of hard use than it had had before, that it looked more impersonal, less conformed to one particular life. In the breeze there was something game about it, even a little jaunty. No wonder he was pleased" (197). Driven forward by this success, Jack decides to initiate a game of catch with Robby, despite how Ames perceives him, another aspect of his reparative mission. Grace seems woven into his gestures: "He looked like a man full of that active contentment that makes even ordinary movements graceful" (199). Just when the reader thinks he has had enough of his father, Jack is possessed by a kind of antic energy, his "hectic outbursts of purposefulness" (202). Out of desperation, new hopes emerge. If he cannot feel at home with Boughton, perhaps he can feel at home in the wider community, a desire he projects onto Ames' family, a father-surrogate. He grew up tormenting Ames, his namesake, so perhaps he can repair that relation, perhaps he could become his "son." He decides, in his ironic third-person way, that "'Jack Boughton might become a Congregationalist'" (158). Or at least play baseball with his son. These hopes are dashed, as we know from *Gilead*, by Ames' sermon on Hagar and Ishmael, a text which lit on Ames' own situation, abandoning his son due to his imminent death, but which illuminates Jack's original sin, the abandonment of his daughter. It's another example of Robinson's exploration of the irony of intentions. What is intended as personally healing becomes harmful to another. Glory and Jack commiserate. What we didn't gather from *Gilead* is the extent of the harm of Ames' sermon. Boughton falls into despair, having lost his son and now his best friend. "Never since the darkest storms of his retirement

had she seen him so morose” (213). The ironies between the novels are particularly rich in these moments. Glory believes Ames to be “in mourning,” but we know from *Gilead* that he’s sleeping well, and not thinking much about the older Boughton at all.

One of the beautiful aspects of Jack’s character, though, is how incapable he is of allowing disappointment to harden into resentment. He does love his father, and continually attempts to reconcile with him. And he forgives Ames after that harmful sermon. He goes back to talk with him in what he calls his “last glimmer of hope, a merest spark of optimism” (304). Jack actually does perform so many honorable deeds, from bathing his father to playing his favorite hymns on piano to remaining devoted to Della, that there is a great deal of irony between Jack’s behavior and the idea of “perdition.” The reader finds plenty of room to agree with Glory and Ames’ assessment that Jack is a “good man.”

Jack’s work to restore the DeSoto is done partly out of this goodness. Also, perhaps, partly to avoid his father and partly out of the working-class ethos he’s acquired doing odd-jobs and manual labor. The car is inoperable, Glory says. “Well,” Jack replies, “a little gas in the tank might change that. A little water in the radiator. Some air in the tires. I wiped off the windshield to make the thing look less—humiliated” (60). Metaphorically, of course, fixing the car reflects Jack’s inward effort to repair the past, a merging of his identity with a process of restoration and rebirth. It is aligned with his other efforts, trimming the trumpet vines to make the house “look a little less forbidding”, putting some petunias on the front step (86). If the house appears “less forbidding,” and the car appears “less humiliated,” perhaps he will too, inside. Glory will realize “all that helpfulness of his...was restoration” (300). If Glory’s spaces are primarily the kitchen and garden, Jack’s becomes the barn, where he spends “a good part of every day in earthy, dank concealment” (87). It is his hiding-place, as inaccessible to Glory as

his past life. Eventually Glory will find his make-shift home in the barn loft, “the dark little room smelled strongly of whiskey and sweat. It seemed almost domestic, and yet there was a potency of loneliness about it like a dark spirit lurking in it, a soul that had improvised this crude tabernacle to stand in the place of other shelter, flesh” (285). Jack’s space, quarantined from his childhood home, and primitive enough to be an animal’s lair, is as private, dark, and lonely as Jack himself. Glory says the space is “so like shame, so like affliction, that they could hardly be distinguished” (286). Symbolically, Glory has visited Jack’s most private self, and what she finds is another world, “where loneliness and grief are time and weather” (286).

The DeSoto will come to represent all the possibilities of redemption—freedom from the past, above all. Robinson’s prose grows lyrical as Glory watches the car out of the garage:

It gleamed darkly and demurely, like a ripe plum. Its chrome was polished, hubcaps and grille, and the side walls of the tires were snowy white. There was a preposterous beauty in all that shine that made her laugh. Jack put his arm out of the window, waving his hat like a visiting dignitary, back into the street, and floated away, gentling the gleaming dirigible through the shadows of arching elm trees, light dropping on it through their leaves like confetti as it made its ceremonious passage.

The polish, shine, and beauty of the vehicle is everything Jack wants to internalize, for his stained past to turn snowy white. Yet Glory sees him still as a “visiting dignitary,” a stranger who appears respectable. It’s both a scene about Jack’s redemptive fantasies as much as it is about Glory’s burgeoning hope figured in the image of “confetti,” here associated with a tickertape parade, while previously associated with the “slight desolation” of the house, “confetti and candy wrappers left after the passing of some glorious parade” (4). The repaired DeSoto

suggests to Glory the possibility of the parade, perhaps a figure for her happy childhood, continuing forward.

The drive Glory, Jack, and Boughton take begins like freedom, but everywhere there are reminders of Jack's past and Glory's disappointment at never having children: "The cows were standing with their calves" (163). As if unconsciously returning to the site of his greatest sin, Jack drives toward "that small white house" where his little girl once lived (163). The drive serves as a reminder of the family crisis as well as offering a figuration of Jack's anguished conscience: any thought, any desire loops back to the scene of guilt. Eventually Jack will destroy his creativity on the DeSoto: "All the drunken ineptitude and frustration, his filthy hands, everything he could reach in the engine pried at, pulled loose" (247). It's a moment of de-creation linked with his moral lapse in abstaining from alcohol. His desire for reparation and redemption have failed. He's left with booze, a broken vehicle, and a botched suicide attempt, figures for Jack's fall back into despair, solitude, "perdition."

Theological ideas eventually rise to the surface. This is another advantage of Robinson's setting—that these ideas can be introduced easily since they are contemporaneous with 1950s Protestant Gilead. The core debate around predestination—whether Jack has been cosmically assigned to "perdition"—is possible because of how this particular culture processes the phenomenon of the truant child. Jack knows this, ironically referring to his "hope there's a minute or two between death and perdition" (119). Belief in god is impossible for Jack, but "perdition is the one thing that always made sense to me. I mean, it has always seemed plausible. On the basis of my experience" (119). It's this that he suspects concerns Boughton the most, the idea that "'I'll always be somewhere in eternity, rotting, or writhing. The poor old devil feels responsible for my soul'" (143). The setting allows Robinson to dramatize how

people growing up in this particular religious culture map their experience onto theological concepts. Robinson is interested in thinking about how ideas like predestination—an idea which she accepts in a kind of mystical form—actually play out in the lives of different individuals, how it can act as both prison-house (Jack) and valuable conundrum (Ames). Jack’s question—“Do you think some people are intentionally and irretrievably consigned to perdition?”—comes out of his need to understand his own haphazard life—or perhaps it is just provocation on his part, or some combination of both. But Robinson is always careful to leave discussions ambiguous, with the tensions in place, this time predestination balanced by transfiguration. The questions the men pursue on the porch, questions about fathers and sons, justice and forgiveness, predestination and grace, remain unresolved, as if they are discussed only to deepen mystery. It is Lila, the female outsider, who offers a radical possibility, which will remain open in the end: “A person can change. Everything can change” (227). Jack seems responsive to Lila’s idea, perhaps because they are both outsiders to Gilead, less at ease in its stiff, Protestant culture.

The other purpose for the inclusion of theological categories is polemical. Robinson wants to reopen a suppressed channel of discourse that, to her mind, better represents the mystery of human nature and destiny. Psychoanalysis is her major opponent. In the 20th Century it rose to dominance and marginalized more traditional discourses that were inflected with theology, and she registers her disappointment with this cultural trend in her essay “Cosmology.” When she asks her writing students what their assumptions are about human motivation,

it became clear that a number of them took for granted that the substratum of all behavior was self-interest, this understood as gratification of certain of those same uncoun­tenanced impulses Freud had in mind...When I laid out my sense of the origins and nature of the

problem, when I suggest that it was indeed a problem there was a moment of thoughtful silence. Then one of them asked, “If you reject Freud, what else is there?” She was asking what other model could be found for interpreting human nature. If a well-educated woman a third my age has to ask the question, and none of her peers is able to propose an answer, then the authority of Freudianism is clearly undiminished. And if at this point it has the potency of common wisdom or of folklore more than of science, its influence on thinking is perhaps only greater for this fact. (191)

One can imagine that a psychoanalyst would have much to say about Jack Boughton. His estrangement from the family may have something to do with parental attachment, the Oedipal complex, or other deeply repressed drives stemming from the stifling sexual atmosphere of his traditional Presbyterian home. Robinson dismisses all of this out of hand. There can be no causal *explanation* for Jack Boughton’s identity or behavior. For her, psychoanalysis is a pseudo-scientific attempt to cram a deeply complicated matter—the formation of human identity—into a set of reductive, humanly-diminishing terms. Theological concepts offer a release from the stranglehold of psychoanalysis. Their value is in their acknowledgment of the essential mystery of human nature and destiny rather than making it rational and deterministic. As Robinson says of Thomas Jefferson’s theologically inflected language in America’s founding documents, his “words acknowledge an essential mystery in human nature and circumstance” (*When* 163). *Home* intentionally blocks psychoanalytic readings of Jack by making him ironic, burying most of his past, and mediating him through Glory’s consciousness. Instead, Robinson frames Jack within an irresolvable theological paradox, between the ideas of predestination and transfiguration, between the idea that human destiny is ordained by God and the idea that, in Lila’s words, “everything can change” (227). *Home*’s theological language is part of Robinson’s

strategy to imagine a richly complicated understanding of human character apart from Freud's influence.

As Jack and Boughton bottom-out in grief, Glory finds a qualified liberation from her past. Her kindness toward Jack was not wasted but used for redemptive purposes, hidden from her until now. "Not that she could entirely forget the bitterness of her chagrin, not that she preferred the course her life had taken to the one she had imagined for it. But she did feel she had been rescued from the shame of mere defeat by the good she was able to do her brother" (254). For Robinson, liberation does not suggest an abandonment of the past, a kind of willful forgetfulness. On the contrary, Glory's rescue contains the memory "of her chagrin." The means of Glory's redemption is through self-denial, losing herself to find herself. Reading novels and brooding didn't help. The effort of losing herself in helping Jack had the paradoxical effect of helping herself. In the end, Glory allows herself to return to her dream of home, the house she would buy with her fiancé and fill with simple furniture and children. Because of the good that came from helping Jack, she has the courage to face her past. This act of remembering, "something she had almost forbidden herself to remember," is a means of releasing the past, forgiving her fiancé and her failures. She puts her desire for children to rest—"Let some sleep of oblivion overtake them, finally"—and resigns herself to new life, in a place others call home, where rumors of her failure to marriage will rise and fall, where "she could start teaching again" (308).

When Della sends back his letters, Jack experiences another round of dashed hopes. Despair and disillusionment set in: "'I don't really know what to do with myself. Any suggestions?'" (230). All of Jack's desires have been blocked, so what is left to desire, what purpose is left for him? "I came back thinking we might be able to make a life here, she and I.

Why did I think that? I came here because everything had fallen to pieces and she had run off to her family” (208). It is about finding refuge for his interracial family within a country tearing itself apart over race-relations. It is also about home: “I just wanted to come home. Even if I couldn’t stay. I wanted to see the place. I wanted to see my father. I was—bewildered, I suppose” (210). Glory reports, “He had fallen back on estrangement, his oldest habit” (230). He seems lost to Glory, and their work of intimacy failed. Despite Glory’s best efforts to clothe Jack anew, he will fall back into his old self. She notices him coming down the stairs “wearing one of his own shirts” (257). Their distance becomes temporal and spatial: “She had not seen him for three days, except when he walked past her on the way to the door, saying nothing, tipping his hat as he left, or walked through the kitchen on the way to his room, saying only good night” (238). Boughton believes Jack is “planning to leave now,” without knowing the absolute sense Jack is thinking of leaving (236). Glory worries that the abandonment would “kill” Boughton and that she might then be partly responsible for his death (165). And Jack knows that “if we were to leave, we would be forever alienated from our little sister, on whom we have become surprisingly dependent” (165).

Jack’s suicide attempt, like his entire trip to Gilead, is another botched effort. He is drunk at the time he stuffs his shirt into the DeSoto tailpipe, and doesn’t remember doing so. Free from the self-preserving effects of rationality, Jack follows his subconscious desire for oblivion—except he forgets the keys. Glory finds him in the garage posing as a transient: “Spare a dime, lady?” He was smiling, a look of raffish, haggard charm, hard, humiliated charm, that stunned her. ‘It’s your brother Jack,’ he said. ‘Your brother Jack without his disguise’” (243). Without his disguise—his ironic masks, his perfect manners—Jack is a poor, homeless, half-drunk, stranger. Stripped “naked” before Glory, he wears a jacket without a shirt, it is the

moment of absolute vulnerability between them. “Now you know me,” he says; “some other aspects of my character” (250). No one in the family now “knows” Jack as well as Glory does, and what she knows only grieves her. Even though his father remains ignorant of this anti-climax, his anxious speculations nearly kill him. “He was still as if he had expended all the life that remained to him composing himself to accept this cross” (251).

After his suicide attempt, Glory/Jesus summons Jack/Lazarus to take off his clothes and wrap himself in a sheet—what Jack will call his “winding sheet”—asking him to come outside into the light, away from the barn/tomb (245). Again, Glory is the dispenser of grace and again it is clothing that serves as its metaphor. But what kind of resurrection is this? “There was grief in his expression, a kind of bewilderment. Could he be surprised? Or was it only the shock of finding himself back in the world, with all his defenses ruined and his one friend lost to him?” (250). Glory is dutiful almost to the point of impatience with Jack, and she confronts the reality that she will never know him, and that all she can offer is acceptance. She’s upset, exhausted by his self-pity, exhausted by her ceaseless hope:

She had tried to take care of him, to help him, and from time to time he had let her believe she did. That old habit of hers, of making a kind of happiness for herself out of the thought that she could be his rescuer, when there was seldom much reason to believe that rescue would have any particular attraction for him. That old illusion that she could help her father with the grief Jack caused, the grief Jack was, when it was as far beyond her power to soothe or mitigate as the betrayal of Judas Iscariot. (248)

It is up to Glory to remove the evidence of Jack’s suicide. Just as she had with Jack’s returned letters from Della, she burns Jack’s socks in a “pyre of kindling” (252). It is a symbolic funeral for Jack’s former self, the self which hoped that Gilead may be home. In her simple,

diligent way, Glory sets things right, creates “home” in the ruptured Boughton house. “How to announce the return of comfort and well-being except by cooking something fragrant” (252).

Robinson loads the fragrance of cooking with meaning that builds continuity between past and present. It is meaning associated with her mother that Glory desires to continue:

That is what her mother always did. After every calamity of any significance she would fill the atmosphere of the house with the smell of cinnamon rolls or brownies, or with chicken and dumplings, and it would mean, This house has a soul that loves us all, no matter what. It would mean peace if they had fought and amnesty if they had been in trouble. It had meant, You can come down to dinner now, and no one will say a thing to bother you, unless you have forgotten to wash your hands. (252)

Glory embodies in this moment the specifically feminine work of creating the emotional atmosphere of home. She is mimicking her mother, carrying forward her rituals and traditions and those very same aromas of chicken and dumplings that smelled of restoration. It is among the same domestic habits as when her mother taught her to iron: “Collar, yoke, sleeves—this was the proper order of things, so her mother had said, and she did not depart from it” (177). Robinson suggests that women like Glory, her mother, and Lila are the high priests of the home, honoring the sacred rituals that make a home a place of refuge and redemption: cooking, clothing, cleaning, leaving fresh flowers beside graves. Within a post-feminist context, the celebration of domestic ritual seems regressive. But Robinson’s point is to honor and sanctify women’s lives that are so “ordinary” and “domestic” that they don’t often appear in literature. If they do appear, the house is portrayed as a kind of cage of boredom and repression that women must escape if they are to realize their authentic selves. Robinson counters this familiar trope

with an unfamiliar one, setting before us women who find their identities in the rituals and repetitions of the home.

This role is hardly minor, simply a matter of dirty dishes and clean bed sheets. Robinson suggests that women are the conduits of culture, the living link to the civilizing traditions of the past and the sustaining force of the family. She seems to agree with the ancient intuition that memory, Mnemosyne, was a woman, since honoring memory—as opposed to Boughton’s escape into memory—is a specifically female attribute in *Home*: “The thought that [Glory] could speak to [Jack and Boughton] in their weary sleep with the memory of comfort lifted her spirits a little” (253). In a culture that habitually honors the high professional achievements of women, indeed that has an award devoted to outstanding female writing, the Orange Prize, Robinson directs our attention to less conspicuous forms of female achievement—“sustaining a familial peace,” for example, cooking chicken and dumplings—which are no more or less worthy of respect (254). As Claire Messud writes, “Robinson has given life and tender individuality to a type—the pious and devoted spinster daughter—and, in so doing, has honored the complexity of someone formerly invisible” (“Witnesses”).

Glory’s cooking, however, does not have the old effect of healing. It does recollect former days, so much so that Boughton is transported to a time when his wife was alive, the first signs of dementia. “I was remarking to your mother about it just the other night. We should not allow this teasing” (280). Glory’s “hope of comforting had not had anything to do with the way things really happen in the world” (281). Toward the end, the narrative tips toward Glory again. She considers her relationship to the community around her, to Gilead, to her and her siblings exiles and returns. “Home. What kinder place could there be on earth, and why did it seem to them all like exile?” (282). Glory meditates on:

That odd capacity for destitution, as if by nature we ought to have so much more than nature gives us. As if we are shockingly unclothed when we lack the complacencies of ordinary life. In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindnesses because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what is wanting and what alleviation would be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. But the soul finds its own home if it ever has a home at all. (282)

The condition of destitution and the hope of restoration is often where Robinson's imagination drifts. It is at the center of *Housekeeping*, when Ruth snaps those last "tethers of need." That humans are capable of experiencing destitution is "odd," something that makes us "hauntingly human," is perhaps evidence of a "soul." Destitution, paradoxically, reveals the need for restoration, just as human imperfection, in Calvinism, reveals the perfection of God. The locus of human exceptionalism is not, for Robinson, in our capacity for autonomous rationality. It is rather in that strange, odd capacity for destitution, the feeling or experience of homelessness.

In the end, the chasm between Jack and Boughton is unbridgeable, opening ever wider as Boughton's mind fades away. It is too late for Jack to initiate reconciliation. Jack's shameful failures in Gilead are nicely summed up by himself: "No one will give me a job, and I'm drinking again, and I recently failed to fire up the DeSoto and sail off to perdition... That I am metaphysically responsible for the floweriest little grace in all Gilead" (278). As a metaphor, Boughton's inability to recognize Jack reinforces their absolute separateness. Jack is no longer Boughton's "son." He is "'the fellow'" who "'plays very well'" (292). He is "'our friend'" (292). Not that Jack's attempt at reconciliation is sincere. We already know he is not "'persuaded of the truth of Scripture'" and that Boughton wouldn't care if Jack had "'tried to

understand” (293-294). Once Boughton realizes that Jack is sitting across from him, he is rhetorically evasive, talking about him as if he were not present. The result is that it is as if Jack never came home. “I was hoping I would be able to tell her that Jack had come home” (297). And in a moral sense, Boughton is right; Jack never came home, never found refuge or rescue from his life-long shame. Their relationship ends in a bitter anti-climax. Jack holds out his hand, the gestural equivalent of “sir,” and Boughton withdraws his hand and says, “Tired of it!” (317). Is the “it” Jack, his leave-taking, or the grief he has caused? Whatever “it” is, it has become impersonal, disassociated from Jack’s name and identity. Both men have crossed the limits of sympathy and have found on the other side the condition of being “bone tired,” as Jack says, from wasted desire (317).

As for Glory, she will inherit the house, a prospect which “horrifies” her (298). She says, “This is a nightmare I’ve had a hundred times. The one where all the rest of you go off and begin your lives and I am left in an empty house full of ridiculous furniture and unreadable books, waiting for someone to notice I’m missing and come back for me. And nobody does” (298). Since the house continues to feel like “exile” to Glory, her fear is of abandonment and loneliness. If the others have “lives,” she’ll have death. But it’s more than living in the house—it’s the responsibility of keeping it the Boughton house, preserving the continuity of its appearance and traditions. In a sense, she is being forced to preserve the family’s identity, since the space of the house contains the memory of the Boughton clan. “She would stay in Gilead and keep the house as it was, the grounds as they were, more or less weedy, more or less unpruned, but essentially the same” (300). Sameness is identity. To introduce difference, whether in the form of furniture or food, would be to destroy the family’s sense of self. Glory

will maintain home, be that source of familial help and rescue. She tells Jack before he leaves, “Now you know where to come when you need help” (316).

Della arrives two days after Jack leaves, not quite an instance of tragic lateness, since Gilead’s attitudes toward race make it totally unsuited for Jack and Della. Glory is particularly attuned to Jack’s son, Robert, who appears eager to be reunited with his father, another generation of the same pattern of absent fathers and lost children. There is nothing Glory can do but exchange a few names and numbers and watch Della and Robert drive away. Peaceful, old Gilead is no place to be for a pair of African American women, and their presence reveals the town’s violent underbelly. Robinson devastatingly concludes her theme of race with the line, “They had to hurry, to escape the dangers of nightfall” (323). Meanwhile, Glory sits on the porch steps, the space of welcoming and hospitality, and considers the effects of Jack’s final abandonment, his last vanishing into absence. His son will wonder about him, perhaps even seek him out when he gets old enough. Glory imagines him coming to Gilead and, seeing the old house in just the way Jack had described—“Yes, the barn is still there, yes, the lilacs, even the pot of petunias”—his son will realize, “This was my father’s house” (325). That is, Robert will know he had a father and a history. By maintaining the house, with its Boughton identity, Glory will have preserved Jack’s presence for his son, thus redeeming the harm of Jack’s abandonment. By welcoming an African American child, she will also redeem her community’s unjust and violent racism. As Messud writes, “She will stay to provide the continuity of family, to provide a home in the world for any Boughton seeking rest.” Glory says, “He cannot know that my whole life has come down to this moment” (325). Of course, this moment is imaginary, a distant possibility kept beyond the book’s narrative time. The inward attitude of hope, manifested within the imagination, is what Robinson ultimately wants to affirm, rather than any material

outcome. Where the reader might see a domestic catastrophe, Glory persists in the hope that everything will be healed, that all suffering and abandonment and loss leads ultimately to peace, joy, refuge, home. The last sentence—"The Lord is wonderful"—might, in any other novel, feel sentimental, even cute (325). But Glory's belief is so unfounded in reality, so opposed to any rational sense of hope, and in such disproportion to the brokenness and despair of *Home* that Robinson's final sentence reads like something preposterous, something absurd, something like grace.

Afterword

In her essay “Marguerite de Navarre,” Robinson quotes John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on the topic of the divine origins of the human body and soul. It could not simply be “nature,” says Calvin, “such exquisite workmanship in their individual members, from mouth and eyes to their very toenails” (*Death* 182). He mentions “such agile motions of the soul, such excellent faculties, such rare gifts, especially bear upon the face of them a divinity that does not allow itself readily to be hidden” (182). Robinson concludes, “This is humankind in its *fallen* state. We have today no comparable language for celebrating human gifts and graces, and no comparable awareness of them, or pleasure in them” (184). This is Robinson’s interpretation of our cultural problem—that we seem to have lost a reverence for human beings. The blame for this cultural loss, as evidenced by interviews and essays, is directed against forms of “modernism,” understood in its aesthetic, cultural, and intellectual forms. Robinson’s fictional project is motivated by the search for an alternative language that will again inspire reverence and awe toward humans. To do so, she has recovered older languages, inflected by religion, that suggest a sanctified view of human nature. Her three novels emerge from sources—from Calvin to Whitman—that most contemporary authors have rejected. Robinson’s originality and value stems from her selection and emphasis of cultural sources, lending her a language that sounds like none other in the contemporary American field. We will only know in time whether she is a lonely and singular voice or whether she will have a wider cultural impact.

Notes

1. See *The New York Review of Books*, “Is Britain Befouled?” by M.F. Perutz, Nov. 23, 1989. Robinson’s reply was published in the *Review* as “‘Mother Country’: An Exchange,” April 12, 1990. The debate is also relevant to the *Review*’s “Nuclear Pollution: An Exchange,” which involved Alan Day Haight, David J. Brenner, Jay M. Gould, J. Kevin Branigan, and M.F. Perutz, Jan. 18, 1990.
2. See for example Roger Kimball’s review, “John Calvin Got a Bad Rap,” in *The New York Times*, February 7, 1999.
3. For the facts of Robinson’s biography I am greatly indebted to the work of previous scholars including Joseph Dewey and James Maguire.
4. Leise’s article “‘That Little Incandescence’: Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*” is an excellent resource for the ways in which Robinson revises and updates Puritan literary culture and Calvinist theology.
5. Honesty and forthrightness about moral flaws is a convention of Puritan spiritual autobiography. Anne Bradstreet in “To My Dear Children” writes, “As I grew up to be about 14 or 15, I found my heart more carnal, and sitting loose from God, vanity and the follies of youth take hold of me” (*Norton* 281).

Works Cited

- Aldrich, Marcia. "The Poetics of Transience: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Essays in Literature* 16 (1989): 127-40. Print.
- Auden, W.H. *Selected Poems*. Ed. Edward Mendelson. New York: Viking, 2007. Print.
- Bailey, Siefker Lisa. "Fraught with Fire: Race and Theology in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010): 265-280. Print.
- Barrett, Laura. "Frame the Past: Photography and Memory in *Housekeeping* and *The Invention of Solitude*." *South Atlantic Review* 74.1 (Winter 2009) 87-109. Print.
- Barth, John. *The Friday Book*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.
- Bohannon, Heathen. "Quest-tioning Tradition: Spiritual Transformation Images in Women's Narratives and Housekeeping." *Western Folklore* 51.1 (1992): 65-79. Print.
- Booth, Allyson. "To Caption Absent Bodies: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Essays in Literature* 19 (1992): 279-90. Print.
- Bradstreet, Anne. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 1960-1974. Print.
- Burke, William. "Border Crossings in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 37 (1991): 716-24. Print.
- Calvin, John. *Steward of God's Covenant*. New York: Vintage, 2006. Print.
- Carver, Raymond. *Where I'm Calling From*. New York: Vintage, 1989. Print.
- Caver, Christine. "Nothing Left to Loose: *Housekeeping*'s Strange Freedoms." *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 69.1 (Mar. 1996): 11-37. Print.
- Champagne, Rosaria. "Women's History and *Housekeeping*: Memory, Representation, and

- Reinscription." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 20 (1992): 321-29. Print.
- Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and Its Tradition*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. Print.
- Davidson, Lale. "Daughters of Eurydice in Absentia: The Feminine Heroic Quest for Presence in Housekeeping." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 4.4 (1991): 19-36. Print.
- Deresiewicz, William. "Homing Patterns." *The Nation*, 13 Oc. 2008. Web. 4 Apr. 2013.
- Dickinson, Emily. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Thomas Johnson. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1976. Print.
- Eliot. T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt Brace. Print.
- . "The Metaphysical Poets." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 1098-1105. Print.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 1092-1098. Print.
- . "Ulysses, Order, and Myth." *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*. Ed. Frank Kermode. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975. 175-179. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Foster, Thomas. "History, Critical Theory, and Women's Social Practices: 'Women's Time' and Housekeeping." *Signs* 14 (1988): 73-99. Print.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990. Print.
- Galeshouse, Maggie. "Their Own Private Idaho: Transience in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature* 41.1 (Spring 2000): 117-37. Print.
- Gardner, Thomas. "Enlarging Loneliness: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* as a Reading of Emily Dickinson." *Emily Dickinson Journal* 10.1 (2001): 9-33. Print.

- Gernes, Sonia. "Transcendent Women: Uses of the Mystical in Margaret Atwood's *The Cat's Eye* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Religion and Literature* 23 (1991): 143-65. Print.
- Geyh, Paula E. "Burning Down the House? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature* 34 (1993): 103-22. Print.
- Hall, Joanne. "The Wanderer Contained: Issues of 'Inside' and 'Outside' in Relation to Harold Gray's *Little Orphan Annie* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Critical Survey* 18.3 (2006): 37-50. Print.
- Handley, George. "The Metaphysics of Ecology in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (Fall 2009) 496-521. Print.
- Hartshorne, Sarah. D. "Lake Fingerbone and Walden Pond: A Commentary on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Modern Language Studies* 20.3 (1990): 50-57. Print.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. New York: Dover, 1994. Print.
- Hedrick, Tace. "The Perimeters of Our Wandering Are Nowhere: Breaching the Domestic in *Housekeeping*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40.2 (Winter 1999) 137-151. Print.
- Hobbs, June Hadden. "Burial, Baptism, and Baseball: Typology and Memorialization in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010) 241-262. Print.
- Holberg, Jennifer. "'The Courage to See it': Toward an Understanding of Glory." *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010): 283-300. Print.
- Hungerford, Amy. *Postmodern Belief*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010. Print.

- James, Henry. *The Art of the Novel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: Norton, 2001. 1960-1974. Print.
- Kaivola, Karen. "The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Contemporary Literature* 34 (1993): 670-90. Print.
- Keats, John. *Selected Poems*. New York: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- King, Kristin. "Resurfacings of The Deeps: Semiotic Balance in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Studies in the Novel* 28.4 (Winter 1996): 565-80. Print.
- Kirkby, Joan. "Is There Life after Art? The Metaphysics of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5 (1986): 91-109. Print.
- Leise, Christopher. "'That Little Incandescence': Reading the Fragmentary and John Calvin in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*." *Studies in the Novel* 41.3 (Fall 2009) 348-367. Print.
- Magagna, Tony. "Erased by Space, Ignored by History: Place and Gender in Marilynne Robinson's *West*." *Western American Literature* 43.4 (2009): 345-71. Print.
- Mallon, Anne-Marie. "Sojourning Women: Homelessness and Transcendence in *Housekeeping*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 30 (1989): 95-105. Print.
- Mattessich, Stefan. "Drifting Decision and the Decision to Drift: The Question of Spirit in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 19.3 (Fall 2008): 59-89. Print.
- Mensch, Betty. "Review: Jonathan Edwards, *Gilead*, and the Problem of 'Tradition.'" *Journal of Law and Religion* 21.1 (2005/2006): 221-241. Print.
- McDermott, Sinead. "Future-Perfect: Gender, Nostalgia, and the Not Yet Presented in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Journal of Gender Studies* 13.3 (Nov. 2004):

259-70. Print.

McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011. Print.

Melville, Herman. *Moby-Dick or, The Whale*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.

Messud, Claire. "Witnesses to a Mystery." *The New York Review of Books*. 10 Nov. 2008. Web.
4 Apr. 2013. <http://www.powells.com/review/2008_11_10>

Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Essays*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.

Painter, Rebecca. "Loyalty Meets Prodigality: The Reality of Grace in Marilynne Robinson's Fiction." *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010): 321-340. Print.

Petit, Susan. "Finding Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Man' in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* and *Home*." *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010): 301-318. Print.

Ravits, Martha. "Extending the American Range: Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *American Literature* 61 (1989): 644-66. Print.

Robinson, Marilynne. *Absence of Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.

---. "At Play in the Backyard of the Psyche." *The New York Times* 26 Apr. 1987: 1-4. Print.

---. "Credo." *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 36.2 (2008): 22-32. Print.

---. *The Death of Adam*. New York: Picador, 1998. Print.

---. *Gilead*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004. Print.

---. *Home*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008. Print.

---. *Housekeeping*. New York: Picador, 1980. Print.

---. Interview. "Conversations: Marilynne Robinson." Web. 18 Apr. 2013.

<<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL82E7EB34CAE1DAA4>>

---. Interview with Tace Herick. *The Iowa Review* 22. 1 (1992): 1-7. Print.

---. Interview with Sarah Fay. *The Paris Review* 186 (2008): 198-215. Print.

- . Interview with Scott Hoezee. *Perspectives* May 2005. Web. 18 Apr. 2013.
 <<http://www.rca.org/page.aspx?pid=3584>>
- . Interview with Thomas Schaub. *Contemporary Literature* 35. 2 (1994): 231-251. Print.
- . "Language is Smarter Than We Are." *The New York Times* 11 Jan 1987: 1-3. Print.
- . *Mother Country*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989. Print.
- . "The Hum Inside the Skull." *The New York Times* 13 May 1984: 35-40. Print.
- . "The Psalms: A Reading and Conversation with Music." The 92nd Street Y. New York, New York. 17 Dec. 2007. Reading.
- . *When I Was a Child I Read Books*. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. Print.
- . "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy." *The New York Times* 13 Oct. 1985: 34-35. Print.
- . Introduction to *The Awakening and Selected Short Stories*. New York: Bantam Classics, 1992. Print.
- Ryan, Katy. "Horizons of Grace: Marilynne Robinson and Simone Weil." *Philosophy and Literature* 29.2 (Oct. 2005): 349-64. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2001. Print.
- Smyth, Jacqui. "Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 40.3 (Spring 1999): 281-91. Print.
- Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Knopf, 1964. Print.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007. Print.
- . *Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992. Print.
- Toles, George. "'Sighs Too Deep for Words': Mysteries of Need in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Arizona Quarterly* 47.4 (1991): 137-56. Print.

Tanner, Laura. "‘Looking Back from the Grave’: Sensory Perception and the Anticipation of Absence in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead*." *Contemporary Literature* 48.2 (Summer 2007): 227-52. Print.

The Bible. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. Print.

Scott, A.O. "The Prodigal Returns." *The New York Times* 19 Sept. 2008. Web. 20 Apr. 2013.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/books/review/Scott-html?pagewanted=all&_r=0>

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford, 2011. Web. 17 Apr. 2013.

<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humanism-civic/>>

Tyan, Maureen. "Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: The Subversive Narrative and the New American Eve." *South Atlantic Review* 56 (1991): 79-86. Print.

Updike, John. *The Early Stories*. New York: Knopf, 2003. Print.

Walrath, Douglas. *Displacing the Divine*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. Print.

Weele, Michael Vander. "Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* and the Difficult Gift of Human Exchange." *Christianity and Literature* 59.2 (Winter 2010): 217-239. Print.

Weintraub, Aviva. "Freudian Imagery in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology* March 1986: 69-74. Print.

Williams, Rowan. "Native Speakers: Identity, Grace, and Homecoming." *Christianity and Literature* 61.1 (2011): 7-18. Print.

Wilson, Christine. "Delinquent Housekeeping: Transforming the Regulation of Keeping House." *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers* 25.2 (2008) 299-310. Print.

Wood, James. "Acts of Devotion." *The New York Times* 28 Nov. 2008: 31-35. Print.