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Heterotopic Domestic Spaces in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

Abstract: This essay proposes to read Marilynne Robinson's 1981 novel *Housekeeping* as a depiction of an imaginary journey that the protagonists undertake in search of habitable domesticity adaptable to change. In a sequence of stages, the house, physically and symbolically, undergoes radical transformation from a solid edifice, firmly rooted in cultural and societal structures, into a mobile Foucauldian heterotopic space (a ship), where boundaries between the inside and the outside, nature and civilization, place and placelessness, presence and absence collapse. Each stage of the transformation is linked to a hero who interacts with the spaces of the house creating, in each case, a unique interconnectedness reminiscent of Bachelard's poetics of nests and shells. I argue that the tension between permanence and transience in the novel is resolved in the bond which the two main characters forge in the course of their journey.

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*, Gaston Bachelard, Michel Foucault, heterotopia, Leo Marx, pastoralism, transience

Describing the landscape of Oregon, which serves as the setting for the events of her first novel, *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson underscores its powerful presence and impact on human lives. "There is a very, very strong emotional music that lives in what appear to other people to be essentially uninhabited places," she says (Robinson, *The Library of Congress Webcasts*). The idea contained in this observation is that landscape, like music, penetrates "the conscience that experiences it" (Robinson, *The Library of Congress Webcasts*) and interacts with it on the level of emotions. Domestic spaces act in a similar way—they are like music, which surrounds, enters into emotional dialogue with and structures the conscience in intimate yet powerful ways. In *Housekeeping*, the connection between domestic spaces and "the conscience that experiences it" undergoes transformation, as the house, in its initial form, gradually ceases to resonate with the protagonist and dissolves into more accommodating spaces.

In the novel, landscape, because of its sheer size, dominates space. Moreover, it is given human features in an attempt to render it habitable. Mountains and lakes acquire emotions and intentions and become active in shaping the metaphysical reality. By ascribing intentions to the landscape, the protagonist establishes a relationship and acquires a sense of security. Aided by her aunt, who is a transient

with no permanent home, she extends house boundaries onto the landscape in an attempt to domesticate it and thus shelter herself from it. Reversely, the realm of the house becomes more habitable by attuning itself to nature (also to the nature of those who live in it). These two movements, outward and inward, are presented in the novel through a process of gradual house dissolution into nature and through images of the domestication of landscape, which invades not only the physical space but also the imagination. The inside and the outside converge in a mutual exchange.

In this article, I wish to present the different stages that rooted domesticity goes through towards its dissolution and eventual transformation into a mobile space adaptable to change. I will specifically address the following set of problems: the permanence and stability of the "father house" and the hazy perimeters of Sylvie's "dissolving house" (using interpretative clues suggested by Paula E. Geyh), the intimacy, felicity and power of interaction with domestic spaces (on the basis of Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology put forward in *The Poetics of Space*), and the mediating properties of home as middle ground "between the realm of organized society and the realm of nature" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43) (as illuminated by Leo Marx's discussion of the pastoral mode in "Pastoralism in America"). Further on, Michel Foucault's ideas on heterotopia and the structure of modern society will help to problematize the connection between the transformation of a house into a mobile space sensitive to change and the trope of a ship repeatedly employed in the novel.

At the beginning of the process of house dissolution is the "father house" (Geyh). The house is meant to contain and protect the family, in a physical sense as a solid permanent structure and in a symbolic sense as a part of Fingerbone's social structure. It has clear-cut boundaries and a set function. There can be no convergence of the two spheres, the inside and the outside, because the outside is a dangerous place, unpredictable and full of the "forces of ruin" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 216): flood waters, snow, blizzards, wind, cold, darkness, decay, crime and the homeless. Hence, the function of the "father house" is to seal off the inside from the outside.

It can open to the outside only if the outside has clear-cut boundaries and a predictable structure. It is a private space in the public sphere of society, in which people have clearly defined roles (the sheriff, the school principal, the judge) embodied in the physical solid structures of town institutions (the police station, the school, the court). In its structure, the house encompasses the oppositions between the public and the private through the division of its space: the parlor is a public space in private, the porch is a private place in public. When the sheriff comes to talk to Sylvie, he remains on the porch thus demonstrating his affinity with the public sphere of Fingerbone and its society of well-kept stable houses, property lines and institutions.

When the "neighbor women and church women" (179), who feel, as Ruth explains, "obliged to come by their notions of piety and good breeding," (183) visit Sylvie, they sit in the parlor—the public space within the private space of the house. They are appalled to discover that the parlor has not been kept public. The fact that

it is "stacked to the ceiling" (180) with newspapers, magazines and cans confuses it with the marginal private spaces of the house such as the attic or the basement. This bewilders and then alarms them, because in their understanding the house should have well-defined and well-kept spaces. If it does not, it ceases to perform its social role. What is even more alarming, in Sylvie's house, not only the balance between the private and the public/social spaces has been upset; it has become permeable to nature as the fragmented remains of dead birds in the parlor prove. Fingerbone cannot accept that because nature is a life-threatening force. Symbolic restoration of the balance between the public and the private takes place when one of the women is introduced "as the wife of the probate judge" (180)—someone having a private relationship to a public figure—which automatically puts the house together with the neglected parlor in the public perspective and indicates that Sylvie has profoundly failed in her role as a housekeeper.

The "father house" is "the site for the reproduction of the patriarchal family" (Geyh 106) and a place where "fatherhood establishes itself" (Bal 107). On a larger scale, "the house is at the center of an outwardly expanding sphere of patriarchal power which links the house of the father to the house as family (as in the House of Abraham) to the house of the nation, encompassing and collapsing the oppositions between the public and private, the domestic and the political" (Geyh 106-107). The house is a privileged ground where the domestic and the political, the private and the public intersect. The woman's role is to guard its perimeters and maintain its stability within the structure of society.

Notwithstanding the male gendering, the house in modern society is generally seen as a female domestic space, also the right "place" for a woman (Geyh, Bal). The connection between the house and the woman also appears in literature. In such works as Sigmund Freud's *The Uncanny* and *The Interpretation of Dreams* and Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* the house and house imagery is often associated with the body of the nurturing mother: "Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (Bachelard 7). In *Housekeeping* the love, warmth, protection and comfort associated with the mother taking care of her children is personified by Edmund's wife—Sylvia.

> She had always known a thousand ways to circle them all around with what must have seemed like grace. She knew a thousand songs. Her bread was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In the summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano, huge, pungent roses, and when the blooms ripened and the petals fell, she put them in a tall Chinese jar, with cloves and thyme and sticks of cinnamon. Her children slept on starched sheets under layers of quilts, and in the morning her curtains filled with light the way sails fill with wind. (12)

Through her presence and actions, which are interwoven with nature, Sylvia encloses the family in a protective cocoon of warmth—the house. She is the energy behind

the functioning of the household. Her actions are so artfully adapted to the needs of its inhabitants that her presence as a physical person blends in with the functioning of the house until one cannot be told from the other: "She was constant as daylight, and she would be unremarked as daylight" (19). She and the house form the essence of home, its soul. They are undistinguishable from each other.

In the art of creating the household, she functions, like her daughter Sylvie much later, as a mediator between the spheres of nature and the civilized world. She brings the best from both worlds to the middle ground of home. She uses societal stereotypes, "the worldly" (Marx, "Pastoralism in America" 44) appearances of a matron to her own and her family's advantage—to protect the inwardness and innocence of her daughters.

> In fact, she was often prompted or restrained by the thought of saving this unconsciousness of theirs. She was then a magisterial woman, not only because of her height and her large, sharp face, not only because of her upbringing, but also because it suited her purpose, to be what she seemed to be so that her children would never be startled or surprised, and to take on all the postures and vestments of matron, to differentiate her life from theirs, so that her children would never feel intruded upon. Her love for them was utter and equal, her government of them generous and absolute. (19)

What Sylvia appeared to be to the members of society—a stately matron, a figure brought forth by the civilized world—suited her purpose of protecting her daughters' naturalness.

Her actions are also coordinated with what is happening in nature. They depend on the weather, the seasons or the time of the day. For instance, she bakes cookies and makes applesauce when it rains. In the summer, she brings roses into the house, then dries the petals to make potpourri for the winter. She decorates the house in such a way as to harmonize it with the rhythm of nature. The curtains fill it with light and the dried petals, cloves, thyme and cinnamon—with fragrance. She not only adapts her family's life to the changes in nature but augments it by what nature currently offers. Whether this is done according to some process of rational decision making—the book does not say. It rather implies that she follows the natural flow. It seems as if she were a perfect homemaker and housewife, however not one identified with the town's social structures and institutions, but one connected to nature. Unnoticed and constant as daylight, Sylvia gracefully "navigates" her household as if she were a captain on a ship: "her curtains filled with light the way sails fill with wind."

Light and darkness are the two elements with which Robinson connects the two characters of mother and daughter—Sylvia and Sylvie. Inasmuch as Sylvia's propelling force is (day)light, it is darkness that drives Sylvie: "Sylvie liked to eat supper in the dark.… Just when the windows went stark blue [she] would call us

into the kitchen. Lucille and I sat across from each other and Sylvie at the end of the table. Opposite her was a window luminous and cool as aquarium glass and warped as water" (86). Just as Sylvia navigates her house compared to a ship whose sails/curtains fill with daylight, Sylvie sinks it in darkness, "the very element it was meant to exclude" (99). Is the element darkness or water, though? Through the extended metaphor the darkness of the night becomes the darkness of the bottom of the lake and the house is transformed into an aquarium. Sylvia rides the surface like a captain, whereas Sylvie explores the depths like a mermaid. "She seemed to dislike the disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a worldful of darkness. Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship's cabin" (99). Despite the differences between these two characters, Robinson connects both to the sphere of nature and the ensuing fluidity and transience rather than to the sphere of manmade societal and physical structures of impermeable boundaries.

Sinking the ship or burning the house is an act of destruction. "Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping" (209), says Ruth, when she and Sylvie set fire to the father house. However, as Christine Wilson points out, Robinson does not postulate rejecting domesticity (303-307). Through the trope of the ship, which often appears throughout the novel, Robinson rather shows that domesticity can be revised and made livable in the face of events that change people's lives and make domestic space uninhabitable. In *Housekeeping* these events include the tragic losses that Ruth experiences. First she loses her father, who leaves, then her mother, who commits suicide, then her grandmother, who dies of old age, next her great-aunts, who leave. Finally she is abandoned by her only sister, Lucille, with whom she has been "almost as a single consciousness" (98).

The stable domesticity of well defined and well kept spaces, solid furniture and repetitive household rituals only gives an impression of solidity. Ruth reflects on its deceptiveness: "[T]he appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother's house was deceptive. It was an impression created by the piano, and the scrolled couch, and the bookcases full of almanacs and Kipling and Defoe. For all the appearance these things gave of substance and solidity, they might better be considered a dangerous weight on a frail structure" (158-159). Domesticity based on the permanence of a structure is not adaptive to change. As Wilson puts it, domesticity in this form "is unsuited for negotiating fluidity of all sorts" (305). It is not equipped to accommodate change and protect its inhabitants, which translates into Ruth's grandmother's fears of not being adequately equipped to protect children against disaster: "And it must have seemed, too, that she had only the frailest and most inappropriate tools for the most urgent uses. Once, she told us, she dreamed that she had seen a baby fall from an airplane and had tried to catch it in her apron, and once that she had tried to fish a baby out of a well with a tea strainer" (25). Ruth, in a reverie about mount Vesuvius erupting over Fingerbone and covering it with a layer of "stone," reflects that the only artifacts left for the "few survivors and the curious" to study would be "petrified pies and the fossils of casseroles" (183), left by the townswomen in a helpful

gesture towards Sylvie. The image of perishable food as a token of aid juxtaposed with the immensity of a volcanic eruption further emphasizes the ineffectiveness of permanent well-defined structures and the connected attitudes of "piety and good breeding" (183) in dealing with the drama of human life. As Laura Barrett argues, houses "[l]ess shelters than fences, … like bodies, are origins of division rather than protection" (13). Comparing her body to a house, Ruth says: "Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone" (159).

Ruth employs her imagination to search for alternative spaces. She invokes Noah's ark: "Imagine that Noah knocked his house apart and used the planks to build an ark, while his neighbors looked on, full of doubt. A house, he must have told them, should be daubed with pitch and built to float cloud high, if need be.… A house should have a compass and a keel" (184). According to Wilson, the invocation of Noah's ark in the book comes as an effect of the evolution of the idea earlier expressed by the ship and by Sylvie's unconventional housekeeping. The ark, built from materials which previously made up Noah's house, affirms the possibility of restructuring, not destroying, the domestic space:

> The invocation of Noah's ark implies the possibility of rebuilding domesticity and functions as a logical conclusion to Sylvie's unconventional, boundary-breaking housekeeping. Ruth's reverie proposes a transformation, not an annihilation, of domestic space. With the pieces of his house, Noah builds his new living space; he does not begin from scratch. The alternative domestic space is governed by its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. (305)

Robinson does not reject domesticity in favor of wandering. Through the employment of the metaphor of the ship, which becomes Noah's ark, she rather points to a possibility of revising, unmooring so to speak, the traditional model based on permanence and stability. Thus Ruth finds it unimaginable to enter a house which looks like a "moored ship," with its artificial full illumination standing in stark opposition to the surrounding darkness and forming a barrier impossible to cross. "The house stood out beyond the orchard with every one of its windows lighted. It looked large, and foreign, and contained, like a moored ship—a fantastic thing to find in a garden. I could not imagine going into it" (203). Robinson uses the ship's properties of mobility, flexibility and freedom to underscore the possibility of finding habitability within domesticity that is adaptive to change, unmoored, not in opposition to its environment, not "contained" but containing, enveloping, inclusive.

Symptomatically, habitability does not have to be linked with domesticity. It can be the function of other spaces, not necessarily domestic, since it "is not tied to a particular kind of space or location, but rather to a relationship between the subject and space" (Wilson 299-300). Habitability is possible when "subjects make space their own" (299). Ruth, for instance, can make landscape her own by giving it

home-like features. This appears in her narration when she describes nature during her excursions to the lake and the forested mountains. She often compares natural surroundings to familiar household spaces, objects or activities like cleaning and cooking. The clouds "soak[] up the light like a stain" (7), the lake "brims inside this circle of mountains" (9), the woods "are as dark and stiff and as full of their own odors as the parlor of an old house" (98), the mountains look like "the broken lip of an iron pot, just at simmer" (112), the sandy lakeshore "abstract[s] its crude shape into one pure curve of calligraphic delicacy" (113), the water of the bay "seem[s] almost viscous, membranous, and here things mass[] and accumulate[], as they do in cobwebs or in the eaves and unswept corners of a house. It [is] a place of distinctly domestic disorder" (113) and the sky "glow[s] like a candled egg" (161). Sylvie, on the other hand domesticates the outside by literally furnishing the garden—she drags a davenport sofa from the house into the front yard, where it remains until it is "weathered pink" (86). The forces of nature cannot be blocked out by walls; no door will make them stay outside, she seems to say. Like Ruth through imagination, she by way of actions constantly traverses the boundaries of inside and outside, both extends the space of the house outward and invites nature inside. As Laura Barrett argues, "Sylvie treats the outside as if it were her living room, and the inside as if it were her garden" (18).

In his seminal essay "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias," Michel Foucault writes that in modern culture, we conceive of space as formed by the relations between sites defined by a particular set of relations. Heterotopias are special in that they relate to all other sites and additionally "suspect, neutralize or invert the set of relations that [these sites] happen to designate." If we consider the relations between the sites of the house and the outside in *Housekeeping*, we will see that the space formed as a consequence of their interconnectedness has some features characteristic of a heterotopia, as it inverts the set of relations these sites designate: as a result of Sylvie's agency, who extends the living room outward and the garden inward, the space contains both the designating relations of the inside and the outside blurring the boundary between the two. What is more, the trope of the ship so extensively employed in the novel, finds its parallel in Foucault's universe, where the vessel occupies "a place without a place" as the purest kind of heterotopia found in culture:

> [The ship] is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens.… The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. (Foucault)

The ship as a heterotopia in *Housekeeping* serves to expose and contest the illusion of stability of the house. "Foucault's ship is unique because it traverses the boundaries between fluidity and stability, interior and exterior, place and placelessness.…

Robinson's use of the ship can be read in a similar way, as a creation of habitability" (Wilson 299). Seen this way, Wilson further argues, Robinson's house becomes a

> transitional space that leads to habitability. If we view heterotopian domestic space as habitable, sustained habitability is impossible within the scope of [the novel]. If, however, we think of [the] revised domestic [space] as bringing the characters to habitability, much like a ship brings its passengers to the brothel or the colony, habitability is invigorated, not destroyed. (307)

The heterotopia of the ship epitomizes the characters' voyage in search for habitability, which is possible through the act of making space their own, domesticating the landscape and opening the site of the house to landscape.

The ship "is linked to the fluidity of water, distinguishing it from other modes of transportation" (Wilson 307). Water, which is frequently and abundantly (the huge lake, the flood) mentioned in the novel, represents flux, constant movement and change, as well as freedom and life. The train, another mode of transportation that appears in the novel, although a mobile space, signifies the opposite of adaptability and hence cannot bring the characters to "invigorated" habitability. Rather, it leads them toward death, the death of a family member. It is thus more connected to Mieke Bal's "father-house" and the sphere of strict impermeable boundaries and permanent structures, the ones described by the disillusioned Ruth as "worse than useless" (184). Wilson describes the train in the following way:

> Like a ship, a train is a vehicle of travel and movement. But the train is more closely bound to a set path—if it leaves its tracks, disaster and tragedy ensue. It is also an implicitly masculine space, at least partly responsible for and symbolic of the mastery and settlement of the land. As spaces, the train and the house are equally dictated by patriarchy. (306)

The train as a symbol of masculinity and "the mastery and settlement of the land" is linked to the only male protagonist of the novel, Edmund Foster. Although dead long before Ruth and Lucille are born, he is the girls' progenitor responsible for the settlement of Fingerbone and for planting them "down in this unlikely place" (3). He came to the town by train from the Middle West: "[I]t was he who brought us here, to this bitter, moon-pulled lake, trailing us after him unborn, like the infants he had painted on the dresser drawers, whose garments swam in some ethereal current, perhaps the rim of the vortex that would drag them down out of that enameled sky, stripped and screaming" (149). If we think of the mechanical train as symbolic of a brute force and the subordination of nature, Edmund's mastery and settlement of the land is quite different. It is not synonymous with violent conquest and exploitation. It is rather connected with the efforts to master the land through knowledge and classification. His dictionary, which the girls use to find the term "pinking shears"

(126) is full of dried plants and flowers pressed between the pages, placed in accordance with the location of their definition. Edmund's masculinity is realized not through the exploitation but through the exploration of nature.

Especially in the spring, he loses himself in the study of nature and becomes forgetful of society bonds expressed through dress, church membership and his role in the family as husband. Nevertheless, these moments in the spring are the ones his wife Sylvia cherishes most, as they bring her a palpable connection to Edmund, although "in that season it had never seemed to her that they were married" (17). The act of marriage as a socially enforced bond thus seems to belong to the sphere of deceptively solid structures and is not synonymous with intimacy.

> The rising of the spring stirred a serious, mystical excitement in him, and made him forgetful of her. He would pick up eggshells, a bird's wing, a jawbone, the ashy fragment of a wasp's nest. He would peer at each of them with the most absolute attention and then put them in his pockets.… He would peer at them as if he could read them, and pocket them as if he could own them. This is death in my hand, this is ruin in my breast pocket, where I keep my reading glasses. At such times he was forgetful of her as he was of his suspenders and his Methodism, but all the same it was then that she loved him best, as a soul all unaccompanied, like her own. (17)

This closeness and intimacy finds further expression in the house that Edmund builds for his family. In its structure, the house has more in common with Gaston Bachelard's nests and shells described in *Poetics of Space* than with the solid structures of town houses. "It is body and soul" (Bachelard, 7).

According to Bachelard, both the nest and the shell are a direct expression of the "function of habitability" of their owners. The bird forms the nest with its own body, its breast—its heart, giving it the characteristic roundness, whereas the mollusk secretes the very building material out of which its house is made and envelopes it around its body to a perfect fit. (The association with clothing is not accidental, as, according to Bachelard, dreams of "garment-house[s] are not unfamiliar to those who indulge in the imaginary exercise of the function of inhabiting.") Both of these houses, the nest and the shell, are "built by and for the body, taking form from the inside… in an intimacy that works physically." Their form "is commanded by the inside" (Bachelard, 101). Edmund's house is the result of his embodied soul's physical labor, built in stages, some of them not completed and not complementary with one another.

Driven by an inside impulse like an insect that enters a new stage in its development, Edmund stops dreaming and begins acting. He quits painting mountains, abandons his underground quarters—his subterranean house compared to a grave "with windows just at earth level and just at eye level" (3)—and travels north-west to a higher ground, to live in the mountains. He carefully selects an isolated spot on the edge of town and constructs the house on elevated ground to

give it protection against the annual flooding of the lake. His prudence proves very effective as the family rarely has "more than a black pool in [the] cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it" (5).

The house rises gradually around him like a shell, in accordance with the family's fluctuating needs and Edmund's growing skills. He makes the furniture for his wife's bedroom. His painting skills now diffuse into the ornamentation of the furniture—a hunting scene, a peacock, the cherubs "whose garments swam in some ethereal current" (149). The legs of the wardrobe and the chest are a bit awkward as they have to "compensate for the slope of the floor" (89). The room itself is three steps lower than the rest of the ground floor probably to accommodate the house to uneven ground.

The crowning effect of his acquisition of knowledge about materials and carpentry are the stairs "wide and polished, with a heavy railing and spindle banisters" (47). However, the stairs unexpectedly culminate in a wall. The wall is "essential to supporting the roof" (47) hence it cannot be tampered with. Consequently, the entrance upstairs is through a trapdoor "left over from the time when the second floor was merely a loft with a ladder up to it" (48). To facilitate entry onto the second floor, Edmund equips the trapdoor with an intricate "device with pulleys and window weights" (48). Thus the seams where the stages of house construction meet are not always smooth.

If one looks closely at a shell, one sees that it is built out of segments. These segments are added gradually as the animal grows and changes. The bindings between segments are frequently uneven and awkward, no doubt an effect of circumstances and the animal's physical condition. Bizarre as Edmund's house may be, its form is "commanded by the inside," by the builder's current skill and condition, imagination and heart as well as his family's changing needs over the years of habitation. As the different spaces, "labyrinths of our privacy" (182) as Ruth calls them, like the segments of a shell, are added gradually, they sometimes subvert one another, like the "stairs, solid, glistening, permanent, are subverted by their ineffectuality" (Barrett 12).

The shell resembles the ship in that it is a mobile home. The ship is a heterotopia where oppositions meet. In this sense, Edmund's house is a heterotopia. It constitutes "heterotopian domestic space" (Wilson 307). Moreover, it seems to epitomize what Michel Foucault says about our contemporary experience of the world, which is "less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (Foucault). Edmund's house is a network of people and spaces that intertwine and interact with one another. Laura Barrett calls Edmund's house "a labyrinth, simultaneously a structure of containment and possibility, enclosure and dispossession" (12). It is interesting to analyze how this structure made up of oppositions interacts with its inhabitants throughout the years of its existence. For, as Bachelard points out, the house is "the real beginning of images" (5), "a large cradle" (7) and "our corner of the world" (4).

The house is Edmund's daughters' "first world," an "earthly… material paradise," where carefully selected and plucked nature's treasures enclose them in warmth and safety. Edmund, the constructor and father, accommodates the house to the uneven ground, whereas Sylvia, the navigator and mother, harmonizes the household with the rhythm of nature. Here, their children are "bathed in nourishment" (Bachelard 7) by both parents, symbolically depicted as two seahorses in one of Edmund's paintings for his wife before they had children. "Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (Bachelard 7). Whereas the expression "the bosom of the house" associates "the house with the figure and body of the nurturing mother" (Geyh 106), the image of seahorses connects it to the father. The connection is intimate, not patriarchal. The house is like the male seahorse's pouch, in which it carries the offspring. Edmund's domestic space is thus the dominion of both the feminine and the masculine. Here the two "Powers Meet" (85).

This heterotopian domestic space, where powers, oppositions and also generations meet in a mutually constructing juxtaposition, is a scene of habitation for all the characters who live and grow (and die) over the years within the space. However, the characters do not just act out their lives against the "inert" background of the house. They interact with the setting. As Paula E. Geyh argues, neither space nor its inhabitants exist independently of one another, but are "mutually constructing" (104). "We do not live inside a void," says Michel Foucault. Just as spaces are constructed by us and thus are an expression of us—"our worst faults" as well as "our best qualities" (Robinson 74)—we are equally constructed by the spaces in which we dwell: "while subjects constitute themselves through the creation of spaces, these same spaces also elicit and structure subjectivities" (Geyh 104).

The interconnectedness in a mutually constructing juxtaposition can be said to operate beyond time and death. For if Edmund had expressed himself through the construction of his home, to that extent he is active in the formation of his granddaughters' subjectivities. Inasmuch as he had expressed himself in the space of the house, he constructs, long after his death, the two distinct female attitudes represented by Lucille and Ruth: the settled and the transient (Geyh 105). Thus, although physically absent, Edmund is present in the girls' everyday life through the space that he had created and in which they now dwell. It may be argued that this dialogue with the girls conducted in Edmund's case from beyond the grave is translated into Ruth's tendency to ponder surfaces: the surface of the lake and the surface of the mirror and to constantly strive to reach beyond surfaces. It is also translated into her feelings of experiencing presence where there is absence, as in her reflections about feeling a palpable presence of her mother, who is no longer among the living. Lucille, on the other hand, wants to live within the utopian space created by things reflected by the surface. She needs to see herself in the mirror.

Within the house, there is a single place literally made up of oppositions—the window. Its double nature may well serve to illustrate the two subjectivities formed

in the house—the settled and the transient. They oppose and exclude each other. The window, depending on whether it is "closed or open… might either divide or connect the inside and the outside" (Geyh 110). So, it simultaneously constitutes and endangers the boundaries of the house. Lucille wants impermeable boundaries, clear-cut divisions, solid structures and permanent things. She prefers the window closed and the light on. She has aims and targets. "I knew that Lucille would not go off in the dark by herself if she did not have somewhere to go," says Ruth (140). Ruth connects to Sylvie, to transience and the outside. She prefers the window open or the light off. "Darkness is the only solvent," she says (116).

Lucille switches on the light and marks the division between the interior and the exterior. Even her name, which derives from the Latin *lux*, associates her with thus created circle of light. However, when the light is on, the window becomes blind to the outside. It reflects only what is inside and excludes everything that is outside. It becomes a mirror. "The window contains its own antithesis, the mirror, and the mode of its existence is determined by the play of light and darkness" (Geyh 111). Not only is the mirror the antithesis of the window, it is also a heterotopia. A unique one too, because it is also a utopia in the sense that it furnishes the illusion of being in a place that does not exist: "In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not" (Foucault). Thus, the lighted window not only excludes but also fixes one on the self and creates the illusion of being an impermeable whole.

> When one looks from inside at a lighted window, or looks from above at the lake, one sees the image of oneself in a lighted room, the image of oneself among trees and sky—the deception is obvious, but flattering all the same. When one looks from the darkness into the light, however, one sees all the difference between here and there, this and that. (Robinson 158)

Lucille stays within the circle of light and excludes Ruth. Lucille's "loyalties" are "with the other world" (95), the civilized world. She acquires the "ability to look the way one [is] supposed to look" and strives for "easy and casual appearance" (121). Believing in the reality of reflection, in the utopia of the mirror, she "roll[s] her anklets and puff[s] her bangs," uses "setting gel and nail polish," but, as Ruth complains, "try as she might, she could never do as well for me" (121). Lucille excludes her sister, because, in her words, it is odd "to spend [so] much time… looking out of windows" or "tie back one's hair with grocery string" (133).

"Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house," says Ruth (154). "Anyone with one solid human bond is that smug," she continues. Upon losing her sister, the one human bond that made her feel at home in the world, Ruth feels "unhoused" for the second time since her mother died. Consequently, Ruth, like her biblical counterpart, follows her next of kin, Sylvie, to regain the bond and thus find home again. "We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child" (145). During their excursion in

a little boat across the lake to the abandoned homestead in the mountains, Ruth is symbolically born again to be Sylvie's daughter. Through a number of images invoking birth, she adopts Sylvie as her mother. Sylvie, on her part, makes Ruth undergo a "rite of passage, a ritual of rebirth and connection" (Ravits 661), which "is complete when Ruth's internalized struggle against the sense of abandonment is resolved in her kinship with Sylvie" (Ravits 661).

If Sylvie makes it easier for Ruth to identify with the realm of nature (Sylvie's name derives from Latin *silva* meaning "wood, forest"), she is also crucial in facilitating Lucille's transition into the civilized world. By being her opposite she makes Lucille see where she belongs—within the circle of light and its illusion of stability. In other words, Lucille assumes her new identity by rejecting Sylvie's transience. "The tenant and the transient face one another across a divide of mutual incomprehension" (Geyh 116). Thus, Sylvie's role in both Ruth's and Lucille's development into who they become—the transient and the tenant—can be seen as that of a "mediator between the realm of organized society and the realm of nature" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43). In this, she is like the shepherd of the ancient forms of the pastoral.

In his article "Pastoralism in America," Leo Marx traces the origins of "pastoral-ism, a widely shared viewpoint that cast favor on the herdsman and his ways" (43) to "the earliest known uses of writing in Mesopotamia near the end of the fourth millennium (roughly 3100 B.C.)" (42). In the ancient forms of the pastoral "[t]he herdsman of the ancient Near East characteristically is a 'liminal figure' who moves back and forth across the borderland between civilization and nature" (43). For him "[t]o mediate… means… to resolve the root tension between civilization and nature by living in the borderland between them. The mediation is two-directional. In the earliest documents there are instances of a shepherd helping to effect the passage of people moving either to or from the organized community" (43). Thus, Sylvie's role in directing the girls towards the two opposing worlds is comparable to the one played by the shepherd in the ancient forms of pastoralism, and her house becomes "a cultural halfway house" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43), the borderland where her two-directional mediation takes place.

Marx argues that the "pastoral perspective, or pastoral-ism" ("Pastoralism" 46) as a worldview and a mode has been present and recurring in different forms of human expression since the times of ancient Mesopotamia (e.g. the Epic of Gilgamesh). Through Virgil's Eclogues and the European shepherd poem of the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, it took new root in America. Here, a pastoral perspective emerged in both political life (e.g. in the political thought of Thomas Jefferson and in individual acts of civil disobedience, such as Henry David Thoreau's refusal to pay taxes to the state that supported slavery and engaged in war) and in literature as a set of recognizable motifs, a typical structure of narration and a hero. The hero, "independent, self-sufficient, and… singularly endowed with the qualities needed to endure long periods of solitude, discomfort, and deprivation" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43) constantly mediates between the realms of nature and civilization.

"[T]his liminal figure combines traits that result from his having lived as both a part of, and apart from, nature; from his having lived as both a part of, and apart from, society" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43). Sylvie possesses all the typical traits of the pastoral hero. She has lived as both the tenant and the transient, and has knowledge of both worlds. Her mastery of a boat against the expanse of the lake is impressive. Her knowledge of the lake currents and the wind tells her when and how to row and when to let go and be carried by the water. The shepherd's "job is to protect his flock from such menaces of nature as storms, drought, and predatory animals" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 43). Her navigation skills are convincing enough for Ruth to fall asleep on the bottom of the boat. She knows simple yet effective ways to comfort cold and fatigue. She can sleep on benches in public parks and she tells the time by knowing the train schedule. She rides the railroad, the symbolic "Atropos that never turns aside" (Thoreau 115). Her knowledge of the train schedule allows her to use the railroad bridge across the lake to lead Ruth out of Fingerbone to freedom.

Henry David Thoreau, Ishmael and Huck Finn are real and fictitious American heroes who also embody the characteristic features of the pastoral hero. At the core of pastoralism, as Marx writes, is "our inescapable confinement to a symbolic border country" ("Pastoralism" 44). Thus, the "underlying attitude" of the pastoral hero "would imply acceptance of the need, in virtually all aspects of experience, to mediate—to strive for acceptable if transitory resolutions—between the constraints of society and the constraints of nature" (44). Because pastoralism has assumed an "opposition between the realm of the collective, the organized, and the worldly on the one hand, and the personal, the spontaneous, and the inward on the other" (44)—it "comports with a dialectical mode of perception" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 44).

Across the divide of the lighted window are the two girls, Lucille and Ruth, in a situation resembling the one of the two main characters of Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*, on which Ruth writes a report for school. Although standing in opposition to each other, they are irrevocably linked, in their case—by the bonds of kinship. Ahab is joined to Ishmael in an expression of a "complex pastoralism in which the ideal is inseparably yoked to its opposite" (Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* 318). Sylvie, like Huck Finn mediates between "the worldly" and "the inward," "the collective" and "the personal" (Marx, "Pastoralism" 44) to deliver Ruth to freedom. Sylvie's mobility as a mediator, her constant movement back and forth across boundaries corresponds to the mobility of the ship—the heterotopia, domesticity adaptive to change, the middle ground between civilization and nature: home.

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