At Home with Transience: Reconfiguring Female Characters of the American West in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*

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**Abstract**

In *Housekeeping*, Robinson uses literary, philosophical, and religious sources to incorporate her heroines in a palimpsest novel about the American West. She challenges masculine archetypes of stories about the frontier, thus opening possibilities for imagining female identities outside the gender constraints of the popular Western. Through her characters Ruth Stone and her aunt Sylvie, Robinson enters the literature of the West into a cultural dialogue about freedom, self-making, and domesticity that is inclusive of major nineteenth century American authors.

**A Palimpsest Novel**

In Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, the transience of the female characters subverts concepts about women's identity that literary and filmic canons have institutionalized. My essay will focus on the novel’s challenge to one of the most culturally influential of these canons: the American Western. Robinson writes *in* and *against* this tradition. Her novel reconsiders female characters of the American West in a double process that displaces the genre’s androcentric bias and repositions women’s roles in this canon.1 Robinson’s deep familiarity with the American Renaissance helps her to find a language appropriate to her heroines, who express a sensibility different from that of the masculine archetypes who have peopled the fictional West. From Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* to John Ford movies, these archetypes have also framed perceptions of what is possible for female identities on the frontier culture. In *Housekeeping*, Robinson dislodges these archetypes and opens possibilities for her heroines Sylvie and Ruth.

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1 Martha Ravits’s analysis of *Housekeeping* points to the novel’s double task of responding to the “mainstream of native patriarchal literature and to the swelling current of writing—British and American—by and about women” (644).
Constructing a world that has "the feeling of femaleness about it," the novel correlates the American West with women’s experience, almost to the exclusion of male characters in the novel (Robinson, in Schaub 231). Robinson associates with female protagonists the themes of loneliness and adventure that have been explored in connection with male frontier heroes. Her protagonists, the orphaned girl, Ruth, and her adoptive mother, Sylvie, are transients endowed with polytropic identities revealed by their nomadism and escape from social restrictions. Sylvie who comes to Fingerbone clad as a roving spirit in makeshift garb, rejects refinement and eloquence. Ruth, her niece, is laconic in public, keeping her (profound) thoughts and feelings within herself. Each possesses further attributes typically associated with heroes of the American West—physical and mental mobility, freedom and nonconformity—but as female characters who find themselves at odds with their community. The female character, who is more usually represented as "an accessory for the male’s heroic adventure" or as the “feminine side of the hero,” embarks in Housekeeping on a personal quest where knowledge is achieved through (self) exploration (Campbell 116).

In an interview with Thomas Schaub, Robinson talks about the mythology of the American West, which she counts part of her heritage. She stresses that the myths of the old West, the stuff of classic frontier stories, emphasize the image of the male protagonist at the same time as they distort or exclude female figures (231). Two interrelated questions arise here: Does Robinson simply confer upon her female characters the attributes of male heroes? And how does she redefine the Western American Weltanschauung with a focus on women’s existence? Robinson offers answers in her fiction by constructing female characters whose transience becomes a way of maintaining family relations and female bonding. She does not simply adopt the pattern of the Western in which the hero’s self-revelation and transformation is related to his

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2 In Housekeeping, the author populates her fictional world mostly with female characters (except for the grandfather, the owner of a boat, the sheriff, and Helen’s and Sylvie’s abstract husbands).
3 In Greek, poly + trepo means "to turn in a variety of directions." The polytropic identity presupposes not only existential mobility, but also the ability to turn away or deviate from a central axis, i.e. from social, religious and moral standards.
4 For classic discussions of the male hero in Westerns, see Slotkin, Smith, Tompkins, and Wright.
5 James Maguire suggests that “whether they are seen as New American Eves or as female versions of traditional male American heroes or as victims of abandonment, Ruth and Sylvie achieve self-reliance, not needing or seeking male assistance, but bearing no ill will toward men, either” (254).