

A MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE OF HOME IN NOVELS

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AND MARILYNNE ROBINSON

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## CHAPTER I

### HOME AND LITERATURE

A familiar quotation says, "Home is where the heart is." Another claims that "home is where you hang your hat." Robert Frost writes in "The Death of the Hired Man," "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." There are numerous other sayings about home, and whether they are funny or nostalgic, sarcastic or serious, they all point to the role that the home plays in the lives of all. Regardless of what people say about their home, one thing is certain: their feelings about home are rarely ambiguous. Home, whether it be of childhood or adulthood, is a place that plays a significant role in our psychological, emotional, physical, and spiritual development. It is a place to which we maintain a strong attachment throughout our lives. "Home is where one starts from," T. S. Eliot says in "East Coker" of *Four Quartets*. Home is a reference point; it is where we come from, and it informs who we are and how we have become who we are.

"The notion of home is as complex as it is fundamental," Jill Jepson writes in an article on the home in Native American literature, but what she says about home is applicable to all cultures (26). Home shapes the way we view the world and how we relate to it. "For some philosophers, being human *means* having a home, a dwelling, a space of one's own. Recent writers have considered the inviolability of home, of its

protection from physical or emotional intrusion. Others have explored the importance of relationships, emphasizing that being with loved ones is one way of ‘being at home,’” Jepson writes (26). Home means different things to different people. It can be a place of safety, a place of healing, a place of family, a place where history is preserved.

In literature, we see this played out again and again as characters move in and out of homes in pursuit of their dreams. From Odysseus trying to get home to his wife in Homer’s *The Odyssey* to Consolata creating a home for social outcasts in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, we see a variety of homes and characters who populate them. And whether the home being portrayed is a physical structure or an emotional, psychological, or spiritual construction, it is consistently a place of profound importance.

“The old Bowden house stood, low-storied and broad-roofed, in its green fields as if it were a motherly brown hen waiting for the flock that came straying toward it from every direction,” Sarah Orne Jewett writes in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (77), presenting the family home as a matriarchal figure—an idea not uncommon in literature by women writers. It is a domestic idea, growing out of a literary tradition that extends back into the nineteenth century, starting with what was known as sentimental, or domestic, fiction. Nina Baym defines such writing in *Woman’s Fiction* by saying, “The term ‘domestic’ for this fiction generally means that the content is largely descriptive of events taking place in a home setting and that it espouses a ‘cult of domesticity,’ that is, fulfillment for women in marriage and motherhood” (26). She furthers this definition by stating that “the domestic ideal meant not that woman was to be sequestered from the world in her place at home but that everybody was to be placed in the home, and hence home and the world would become one” (27).

Most of these domestic novels follow a formulaic structure, telling the story of a young girl who has been taken away from her family in one way or another and denied the support she had counted on to sustain her, forcing her to make a living on her own (Baym 11). Ann Romines describes the heroines of such novels as “domestic outsiders” who are “at odds with the rituals of the household in which they find themselves” (7). At first, the heroine takes herself very lightly and expects the world to protect her, but throughout the course of the novel, she learns to take herself seriously and to look to herself for support and strength. She realizes her own worth and “enters the real world and discovers how deplorably she has been fitted by education or upbringing to deal with it” (Baym 20). Louisa May Alcott’s *Work*, Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*, and E.D.E.N. Southworth’s *The Hidden Hand* are examples of such novels. They typically end with the heroine’s marriage, but they rarely show what happens next, namely, her life in the home.

While they do tend to adhere to the patriarchal idea that a woman’s place is in the home, these domestic stories are also subversive in that they suggest that a woman can support herself and that she can achieve a wide sphere of influence even, or perhaps especially, from within the home. The authors of domestic fiction felt that if each woman were to “develop herself as a worthy representative of domestic values,” women could make a “peaceful revolution [...] [They] could change others by changing themselves, and the phrase ‘woman’s sphere is in the home’ could appear to mean ‘woman’s sphere is to reform the world’” (Baym 49). In an article published in the *New York Ledger* in 1865, Fanny Fern wrote, “*Something to come home to!* That is what saves a man. Somebody there to grieve if he is not true to himself. Somebody there to be sorry if he is troubled or sick. Somebody there, with fingers like sunbeams, gliding and brightening whatever they

touch, and all for him” (331). If a woman’s influence in the home can save a man as Fanny Fern suggests, and if, as Baym suggests, home and the world are one, then a woman’s influence stretches beyond the walls of her husband’s house, and in saving a man, a woman can save the community and even the world. And in realizing her own worth and strength, a woman can change her perception of herself, and in so doing, she can change the world’s perception of woman.

Novels written later in the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century grow out of this domestic fiction and build on the foundation that it provides. In *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, Ann Romines argues that in the latter half of the nineteenth century women began writing about housekeeping in new ways, saying that “some of the best fiction by American women writers is dominated and shaped by the rhythms and stresses of domestic ritual, by the complex of domestic-literary concerns I have called the home plot” (9). In a sense, these novels show what happens next: they tell a woman’s story after she has married and set up housekeeping in her own home. Unlike their predecessors, these novels are not formulaic, although they do share some common elements. The narratives of these novels usually unfold around the domestic activities of the women, and many feature a wise older woman, a mother figure, passing domestic knowledge to a younger woman. Like domestic fiction, these stories of the home plot have subversive tones. They show women in the home, the place patriarchy has put them in, performing household chores, tasks patriarchy has given them. However, in doing these things, women find ways of taking control of their own lives, discovering their own abilities and restrictions, and ultimately making decisions about what they will do with what they learn about themselves. The endings of these



novels are diverse. Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* closes with a picture of Ántonia as a wife and mother, work-hardened, but pleased with the decisions she has made for herself. *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by Sarah Orne Jewett shows the narrator leaving the village of Dunnet Landing, having become fully inducted into the community through the learning of domestic ritual but ultimately choosing the life of a writer. And Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* shows Edna Pontellier choosing death rather than choosing between domesticity and creativity. The writers of these home plots examine important issues for women, telling "complex truths about the satisfactions *and* dangers that domestic ritual has meant in female lives" (Romines 9).

Over the years, domestic fiction has changed and evolved, but it has not disappeared. Even contemporary women writers are creating what could essentially be considered domestic fiction—novels that focus on issues relevant to women and that take place primarily within the home, with women creating and caring for the home. While contemporary women are no longer limited to the home, it is still a device by which female characters are defined and discover who they are. In *Home Matters*, Roberta Rubenstein writes,

During the last third of the twentieth century and into the current century, women have felt the tension between private and public identities—between securing a professional life and honoring a private life that embraces elements of what is traditionally called "home-making." [...] In this sense, longing for home may be understood as a yearning for recovery or return to the idea of a nurturing, unconditionally accepting place/space that has been repressed in contemporary feminism. Narratives that

excavate and recover the positive meanings of home and nostalgia in effect represent “the return of the repressed” in that they foreground, confront, and attempt to resolve that subversive longing. (4)

In resolving, or even attempting to resolve, that tension between public and private life, these narratives raise important questions that help women to discover their identity as it relates to both worlds. As these women discover themselves, the home itself begins to reflect the women who live there. These new, contemporary domestic novels are as diverse as the women who write them and are far less easily defined and categorized. They are also, like their predecessors, still subversive. They show that, even in the ages of feminism and post-feminism, women still face many challenges in realizing, and making others realize, their own self-worth. Contemporary women’s writing shows how women deal with those challenges. In many of these writings, we see women either working through the challenges, overcoming them, or sometimes even succumbing to them.

Traditionally, domestic fiction has been a cultural phenomenon primarily of the middle class Anglo female’s experience. Women of other cultures, ethnicities, and classes have not necessarily been confined to the home (or at least to their own home—in many cases African American women served as housekeepers in white women’s homes), so their writing has not always reflected a domestic influence. In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Toni Morrison summarized how both African Americans and Native Americans related to the concept of home and finding a home, saying,

Only African-Americans were not immigrants in this rush to find a heaven. They had left a home. So they're seeking for another home, while other people are doing the same thing, except the other people were leaving a home that they didn't want to be in any longer, or couldn't be in any longer. Native Americans were being moved around in their home.

(par. 10)

These different relationships to home create different responses. Writing by African Americans and Native Americans, as well as other ethnicities, is not as overtly domestic as Anglo American writing; however, home plays an important role in their stories as the women seek to discover their place in a home or outside of it. In *Home Matters*, Roberta Rubenstein writes, "In a fragmented postmodern world in which exile and migration are increasingly common and as entire populations are displaced by ethnic wars, genocide, famine, and other destructive forces both human and natural, the definition of home [...] may depend on where one stands not only psychologically and ideologically but geopolitically" (2). Each culture responds to and discusses home in different ways. In examining this multicultural spectrum of writers, we find more ways of understanding and finding meaning for home. African American writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston; Asian American writers like Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Lisa See; Native American writers Louise Erdrich, Paula Gunn Allen, and Leslie Marmon Silko; and Latina American writers like Julia Alvarez, Sandra Cisneros, and Isabel Allende all demonstrate a talent for capturing the unique voices and struggles of the women of their respective heritages and show how that heritage shapes the home.

The writers I will look at are African American Toni Morrison, Native American Louise Erdrich, and Anglo American Marilynne Robinson. Because the domestic experience, or the home plot, is so central to Anglo American women's writing, I feel that it is important to include that experience in this study. In contrast, the African American and Native American experiences are vastly different; and yet, there are striking similarities between the three cultures and their notions of home. Whether these women write about the joys and horrors that take place within the home, or about protecting the home from being sold or taken away, or about leaving the home, the sacredness of the home and what it represents is a significant part of the stories. I chose each of these writers because of their ability to capture that sense of sanctity in the midst of the mundane. In addition, they are all award-winning, critically-acclaimed writers who have made significant contributions to the field of women's writing.

In examining novels by these three women, certain common elements emerge that point to the significance of the home in American women's writing. For many women writers, the physical structure of the house itself often plays a significant, and symbolic, role, and Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson are no exception. Domestic ritual, the activities played out on a daily basis within the house, dominates and informs both the action of the novels and character development. Finally, in many of these novels, there comes a point at which the women must leave the home, either of their own accord or because they have been forced out of it. The manner in which the women leave becomes a defining moment for themselves and for the novels.

The house is undeniably an important structure in women's writing. Consider the number of novels by women writers in which the word "house" is a part of the title: *Little*

*House in the Big Woods* and *Little House on the Prairie* by Laura Ingalls Wilder, *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton, *The House of the Spirits* by Isabel Allende, *Keepers of the House* by Shirley Ann Grau, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, and *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson are just a few examples. In these and many other novels, the house itself plays an important role in the story and in the development of the characters. The Convent of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, with its pornographic décor transformed into a semblance of purity by the nuns, and then recreated by Consolata and her girls, helps to define the women who live there, as well as those who stand in opposition to it. The house of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* undergoes several transformations as it passes from grandmother to great aunts to Sylvie, mirroring the transformations of the two girls who live there. And Fleur's cabin on Lake Matchimanito in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* is a stronghold for traditional Ojibwe beliefs attacked by the twisted Catholicism of Pauline Puyat.

Architectural historian Lynne Walker gives a brief history of the architecture of homes in her article titled "Home Making: An Architectural Perspective." She defines the building of the Victorian home as being based on the idea of masculine public space and feminine private space. Central to its construction was an idea of domesticity and family life. The modern home, in contrast, was anti-domestic, built to be a "machine, [...] standardized, impersonal, scientific" (827). The postmodern home, she concludes, is "portrayed as a symbol and vehicle of traditional values and nostalgia, a quest for comfort and security" (830). It indicates a return to domesticity. All of these ideas of the home are determined by how the architect views and uses space. The role of space,

Walker says, “is that it tells people where they can and cannot be, which, in part, defines what people feel about who they are and how they feel about each other” (829).

While none of the homes in the novels of Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson are explicitly defined as Victorian, modern, postmodern, or any other particular period, the architecture of the houses and the designation of space therein plays a role in how the characters think about themselves and others. A close reading of the houses in these novels uncovers many links between the houses and the characters. It is important to pay attention to how the houses are described and to who is doing the describing. Many times, the way a character describes a house or a room reveals many things about that character. In those descriptions of the houses, it is also important to pay attention to how rooms are arranged. Since these books do have a domestic nature, the kitchen usually plays a vital role, and examining the time characters spend in their kitchens, and the location of the kitchen within the house, offer new ways of understanding the characters.

Literature professors Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti apply some of these ideas to literature. In their article “Reading the House: A Literary Perspective,” they write, “The house—and architecture—have served as foundational, powerful, and recurring analogues throughout the history of literary interpretation” (837). Their article explores this idea, looking at the ways characters define the spaces in which they live at the same time that those spaces define the characters. They cite examples such as Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” in which the sinister, decaying house of the Usher family mirrors the madness of the people who live there, and the forbidden attic of Rochester’s house in which his mad wife Bertha is imprisoned in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane*

*Eyre*. In both examples, the characters' madness both shapes and is shaped by the spaces they inhabit.

The article also examines the roles houses have played in literature, claiming that in many cases, the home represents psychological space as well as physical space. They write,

Our imagination, our consciousness, needs to locate itself in a particular space, to find a home, to articulate its homelessness, its longing for home, its sickness for home (nostalgia). Thus, novels *and* houses furnish a dwelling place—a spatial construct—that invites the exploration and expression of private and intimate relations and thoughts. (839)

In the novels by each of these women, we see this idea occurring frequently. Many of the women in these novels are seeking a safe place in which they can express themselves. In most of these cases, self expression is a means of healing the wounds of their pasts and thus is an important part in their character development. As we look at the homes these women find and recreate for themselves, we can see how the houses and the unique features of those houses reflect, enhance, or hinder that healing process.

After looking at the houses of these writers, I will then examine the ways the space within the home—domestic space—is used, especially by the women. The homes I will look at are filled with domestic activities such as baking, cooking, cleaning, and sewing—ordinary, everyday activities that are made extraordinary by the ritualistic aspects they come to embody. Ritual, according to sociologist Orrin E. Klapp, is characterized by repetitiveness, symbolism, emotional attachment, and community

(Romines 12). It is a way by which beliefs are maintained and knowledge is passed on to younger generations. As we will see in the novels we examine, a house without these activities is an impotent physical structure. It is domestic ritual that creates a nurturing, accepting, thriving home.

To apply Klapp's definition, the inherent daily-ness of housekeeping (tasks that must be done on a daily basis) and the fact that it is never finished, make it a repetitive activity. These ordinary acts of housekeeping are ways to create order out of chaos, and to create family out of individuals, making it both symbolic and community-building. Housekeeping is a solitary act, performed in the privacy of one's home; however, housekeeping is an act that every woman participates in, and thus it is also a communal act. And for many women, it can be an emotionally charged activity, something that connects them to their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters. Theologian Kathryn Rabuzzi states that housekeeping "makes the individual a player in a scene far older and larger than her individual self. No longer does she participate in profane historical time; instead, she is participating in mythic time" (qtd in Romines 6).

Under the mantle of domestic ritual falls a number of activities centered around providing for a family's well-being, including cleaning, cooking, gardening, sewing, etc. But none of these activities stand alone. In *Out of the Broom Closet*, Jeannette Batz Cooperman notes,

Each goal is a process linked to the others, not an isolated simple task. Well-being suggests hospitality, which requires shopping and cooking, which necessitates cleaning, and clothes break into buying, sewing, washing, drying, mending, ironing, folding, hanging and storing, and



chores overlap in their use of water or coal or electricity, and systems intersect and affect each other. (2-3)

She quotes another writer, Clarissa Pinkola Estés, who discusses the ways in which these activities all serve as metaphors that provide women with ways to enhance the “soul-life” (2). By preserving the well-being of each family member through the performance of these tasks, women can also preserve and enhance their own personal well-being. In examining the works of Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson, it is important to pay attention to these common, everyday activities in order to understand the greater meaning behind them. Housekeeping, as ritual, becomes an art form, an act of self-expression, and a spiritual meditation, an act of self-discovery. As such, housekeeping reveals the inner desires and lives of the women who perform it.

The concepts of domestic space and domestic ritual together evoke a number of emotions for the women living in these spaces and performing these actions. For some women, the home is a place of comfort and peace, while for others it is a place of imprisonment. For the women in the novels of Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson, home is both of these, and more. And, for women in particular novels by these writers, the home is a place that they ultimately must leave. The women of Morrison’s *Paradise* flee the Convent after their home is attacked. Fleur destroys the forest around her home and then leaves the reservation after her land has been sold to a logging company in Erdrich’s *Tracks*. Ruth and Sylvie set fire to their home and then follow the railroad tracks across the lake when the town authorities try to separate them in Robinson’s *Housekeeping*.

In *Through the Window, Out the Door*, Janis Stout looks at several writers whose works hinge on that “moment of departure,” saying that it “is an essential moment of truth,” and that “as the moment of rupture of so many boundaries, [it] is the node of greatest narrative energy. It generates the power Eudora Welty refers to in writing [...] that ‘life is most passionate in the promise, not in the fulfillment’” (xi). Welty’s statement is certainly true of the novels I will be examining. In each of these novels, the moment of leaving home occurs at the end of the novel, and very little information is given regarding what happens next. However, it is clear that leaving home plays a significant role in the development of each woman. It is a passionate act full of promise.

Women’s fiction of the nineteenth century focused on a girl’s search for a husband and a home, and the fiction of the twentieth century shows the next part of the story: her life in that home. Women’s fiction of the late twentieth century goes beyond that by showing woman’s departure from the home. Stout states that, “In making their departures, women assume the role of subjects in their own stories rather than objects sought and exchanged by men. Leaving the warehouses of domesticity in which their value is stored, they claim the right to establish their own systems of valuation” (3). Although this may be true in some cases, for the women in these novels, it is not the whole truth. All of the women in these novels have already left home once, and have either found and created a new home, or have returned home and recreated it for themselves. In creating homes that reflect who they are, these women have found value for themselves within the home, and are leaving home in order to hold onto their value, and to preserve the sacred spaces they have created in their homes.

In the following chapters, I will look at each writer individually, addressing the home as it relates to each writer's particular cultural experience. In the chapter on Toni Morrison, I will discuss how slavery influenced, and continues to influence, the idea of the home and the African-American woman's relationship to it. The chapter on Louise Erdrich will look at the connections between the land and the home and the impact of relocation to reservations on the Native American experience. The chapter on Marilynne Robinson will discuss the home in the Anglo-American tradition, particularly as it relates to the experience of the settlement of the West. Each chapter will also discuss the three common elements I have just laid out, showing the ways in which characters relate to their respective homes and use the home as a way to both discover and express themselves. Ultimately, I will show that the values represented by the home are dynamic and not limited to the walls of a house. Creating and preserving a home becomes synonymous with creating and preserving self-worth in the literature of these writers. And, when the home or the self is threatened, sometimes it becomes necessary to take heroic measures to protect the sanctity of both home and self.

## CHAPTER II

### HOME AND PARADISE IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

In an essay titled "Home," Toni Morrison writes that "matters of race and matters of home are priorities in [her] work" (4). For her, the two are linked as undeniable parts of who she is and what she seeks to accomplish with her writing. She writes,

I have never lived, nor has any of us, in a world in which race did not matter. [...] The race-free world has been posited as ideal, millennial, a condition possible only if accompanied by the Messiah or situated in a protected preserve [...]. But, for the purposes of this talk and because of certain projects I am engaged in, I prefer to think of a-world-in-which-race-does-*not*-matter as something other than a theme park, or a failed and always-failing dream, or as the father's house of many rooms. I am thinking of it as home. (3)

By thinking not of a race-free world, but of a world in which race is insignificant, as home, Morrison deconstructs the architecture of race. She removes it from its polarized context and places it within the familiar context of home. As she says, she "domesticates" this idea of race-not-mattering (3), moving it "away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity" (4). In this way, it becomes a more realistic possibility, something with which

anyone can relate. As an African American writer, she acknowledges that she works within a racial context, or house; however, she makes a point of living in that house under her own terms, of rebuilding it into “an open house, grounded, yet generous in its supply of windows and doors” (“Home” 4). She turns the racial house into a home, allowing for “the concrete thrill of borderlessness” (“Home” 9), an openness that encourages freedom of thought and expression. While Morrison primarily discusses race in this essay, she also says a lot about what the idea of home means to her. A house is built with the intention of keeping people out—or in—whereas a home is open and welcoming. It is a place that is “psychically and physically safe” (“Home” 10). Home represents freedom and independence, but in its openness, it also represents community.

In an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Morrison spoke on what the idea of home means to African Americans, discussing the forced relocation from Africa and saying, “African-Americans were looking for a second [home] and hopefully one that would be simply up to them, their own people, their own habits, their own culture, and to contain themselves in that. So it makes the motive for paradise a little bit different” (par. 10). For Toni Morrison, a home built on her own terms is a sort of paradise, and we see this idea expanded on in her novel *Paradise*, which was published in the same year as the essay titled “Home.” I imagine *Paradise* could have been one of the “certain projects” she refers to in the essay.

Matters of race and home converge in *Paradise*. It takes place in Ruby, Oklahoma, an all-black town established by descendants of ex-slaves. A replica of a town called Haven that was built by those ex-slaves in the nineteenth century, Ruby is a place set apart from the rest of the world, a sort of utopia or paradise in which there is no need

for a jail because “no criminals had ever come from [this] town” (*Paradise* 8). It is a home for the people who live there, a safe place in which they can live freely and on their own terms. In this home, race determines who belongs and who does not. Race matters in Ruby. White people may pass through, but they don’t stay for long. Even among the African Americans who have made a home in Ruby, skin color matters.

Patricia Best, a schoolteacher who spends her spare time cataloging the genealogies of Ruby’s people, takes note of the families she considers to be “eight-rock,” which is the name of coal taken from the deepest levels of mines. “Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them,” she says to describe them (*Paradise* 193). Although she is the daughter of one of Ruby’s founders, Pat recognizes that her family is no longer recognized as such because her father married a woman with light skin. Other 8-rock families who have married outside of 8-rock blood have also been cut out of their part in Ruby’s history. These families represent change, and change, according to Ruby’s founders, is a betrayal of their fathers’ and grandfathers’ sacrifices and trials. Change has the power to destroy the home they have constructed.

Seventeen miles outside of Ruby is the Convent, a large house that was an “embezzler’s folly” (*Paradise* 3) turned into a convent and school for Arapahoe girls. In the time of the novel, it is the home of Consolata, a woman who was taken in by the nuns as a young girl, and several other young women who are running away from pasts filled with sorrow and pain. In contrast to Ruby, it is a place in which race does not matter. While we know that Consolata, also called Connie, is Brazilian, we are never told the races of the other four women who come to live in the Convent, although we do know

from the first sentence of the book that one of them is white. In the Farnsworth interview, Morrison discusses this, saying, “My point was to flag raise and then to erase it, and to have the reader believe—finally, after you know everything about these women, their interior lives, their past, their behavior, that the one piece of information you don’t know, which is the race, may not, in fact, matter. And when you do know it, what do you know?” (par. 20). Race is not important in the Convent. Instead, importance is placed on creating within its walls a safe and welcoming place, a home.

Toni Morrison initially titled this novel *War*, but changed it at the urging of her publisher. As a title, *War* does offer a more accurate description of the novel. War and aggression abound in both the town of Ruby and at the Convent, as well as between the two places. The people of Ruby are divided along the lines of young and old, change and tradition. Many, though not all, stand in opposition to the women of the Convent, who spend most of the book fighting among themselves. Violence, too, is in abundance. The book opens with a gunshot that is repeated later in the story. Between the two shots, the story unfolds, providing the reader with history, motive, and insight. There are many other images of war and violence, which would make *Paradise* seem like an ironic title; however, it points to the one thing that all the characters, regardless of where they come from or how they got there, desire: a safe haven, a place to belong, home. Whether or not home can also be paradise can be determined only by looking at the homes presented in the novel.

“Home is not a little thing,” Patricia Best says to Reverend Richard Misner in *Paradise* (213). It is a sentiment that permeates the entire novel. The creation of home, the maintaining of home, and the desire for home drive the actions of the townspeople of

Ruby and the women of the Convent. Between these two places, we are presented with two vastly different homes. Ruby is an exclusive, meticulously constructed and organized place, while the Convent is inclusive and has grown organically. Despite their differences, they are both home for the people who live there, and they both represent a longing for a utopia or paradise, a place of peace, prosperity, and safety. An examination of the two places as houses and homes and of the domestic rituals enacted there shows that although both places try to provide this paradise for their inhabitants, neither quite succeeds. Both are threatened from within and from without, and when those threats arise, what the characters do to survive results in moments of judgment and of grace.

Ruby was established and built by fifteen families, fueled by the dream of the young men of its predecessor Haven. Morrison writes, “Loving what Haven had been—the idea of it and its reach—they carried that devotion, gentling and nursing it [...], and they made up their mind to do it again” (*Paradise* 6). Everything about Ruby was meticulously planned by these men under the leadership of the twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan, owners of the bank and the richest men in town. In their collective, powerful memory, the brothers hold the memories of their father and grandfather, who traveled across Mississippi and Louisiana and into Oklahoma to join one of the all-black towns being built at the time, only to be turned away not once, but twice. Understanding that “neither [they] nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves,” these men founded Haven. With that in mind, the founders of Ruby sought to rebuild the dreams of their fathers by isolating themselves deeper inside Oklahoma.



Surrounded by flat grasslands and farmlands, Ruby's borders are clearly defined, like those of a house, with its streets laid out in straight lines. Running north and south through its center is the appropriately named Central Avenue. It is three miles from beginning to end, with five side streets running east and west. Roads are paved within the town, but not outside it. A sign marks the entrance to town, reading "RUBY POP. 360" (*Paradise* 45). It is a quiet town, where the houses all look the same—pastel and neatly kept, with "front yards given over completely to flowers" (*Paradise* 89). The businesses that line Central Avenue are not distinguishable from the houses, with the exception of the bank, the feed store, and three churches. Ruby is designed to turn away outsiders—it has no public phone, no bus stop, no restaurants, and no lodging—while keeping its inhabitants safe and comfortable.

Like the Victorian homes discussed by architectural historian Lynne Walker in "Home Making," Ruby is divided into public masculine space and private feminine space. Walker writes, "Although the Victorian home was feminized and endlessly depicted as 'woman's place,' it was nevertheless heavily patriarchal in terms of territory, control, and meaning" (826). With a few exceptions these patriarchal ideals are prevalent in Ruby. Everything about the town, from its location to the way it is organized, was designed and chosen by the men. The location, ninety miles from any other town, over two hundred miles west of Haven, was "as far as they could climb from the grove" contaminating the town their grandfathers had made," Morrison writes (*Paradise* 16). Isolation, they hoped, would prevent the same decline happening again, and it would provide a semblance of safety. Away from "Out There where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled," these men planned

to start fresh and, if not completely shut out, to at least discourage strangers (*Paradise* 16). They built churches, stores, a bank, and a school, but “nothing to serve a traveler” (*Paradise* 12). All this was done to protect the women, to make it possible for a sleepless woman to

rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey. (*Paradise* 8)

Discussing Victorian houses, Lynne Walker writes, “Manliness and social status were embodied and constituted, in part, through spatial boundaries that produced and upheld dominant gender definitions and relations and provided privacy for family and guests. [...] In addition [...], sexual and social differences were gendered in terms of color, style, and detailing” (826-27). In *Ruby*, the feminine spaces are the homes, painted in pretty pastels with gardens filling the yards. These are the places where women work and play, while the men spend their time out of doors, in the businesses, on the farms, at the bank, or at the Oven.

Of course, no house is complete without a kitchen, and in *Ruby*, that kitchen is the Oven, a structure that symbolizes everything the founders of *Ruby* hold sacred. While in most patriarchal homes the kitchen was considered woman's particular place, in *Ruby*, the Oven is the province of men. It was the first structure built in the original town of Haven. It was “flawlessly designed” by the Old Fathers so that it “both nourished them

and monumentalized what they had done,” Morrison writes (*Paradise* 6-7). It served as a communal kitchen, a gathering place, and the site of baptisms. For a people who had been denied inclusion in other towns, the Oven stood as a symbol of their ability to survive as a community on their own. Even after houses had been built, after there were churches, stores, a schoolhouse, and a bank, even at the height of Haven’s greatness, the Oven remained the place people went to most often. “No family needed more than a simple cookstove as long as the Oven was alive, and it always was,” Morrison writes (*Paradise* 15). When the town sank into decay and died, the Oven still stood, and it was the one thing the “new fathers” took with them when they decided to relocate and rebuild. With loving care, they took it apart and packed it in trucks with their personal belongings, and then reassembled it in Ruby with equal care.

Domestic ritual as defined by Ann Romines “provides essential cultural continuity” (6) and “preserve[s] the shelter” (12). It allows for growth and continuation. Without domestic ritual, a house remains only an enclosing physical structure and becomes stagnant and impotent. The town of Ruby as a house is an example of this. The Oven, once the center of domestic ritual in Haven, has become a memorial to the past, and its usefulness has changed. The prosperity known in Ruby makes the communal kitchen function of the Oven obsolete. It is, as Soane Morgan, wife of Deacon, observes, a “utility become a shrine” (*Paradise* 103) and has, as Roberta Rubenstein writes in *Home Matters*, “absorbed and reflected dissonant attitudes within the community itself, including sexual indulgence, political dissent, and, finally, self-righteous vengeance” (143). The Oven is the place where Lone DuPres overhears the men and learns of “the

devilment they were cooking” (*Paradise* 269). Once a place of nourishment and community, it is now a place of violence and dissent.

Among the women of the town, domestic ritual has been replaced with appliances. Walking through Ruby’s streets at night, Dovey Morgan, sister of Soane and wife of Steward, notes,

The women who were in their twenties when Ruby was founded, in 1950, watched for thirteen years an increase in bounty that had never entered their dreams. They bought soft toilet paper, used washcloths instead of rags, soap for the face alone or diapers only. In every Ruby household appliances pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed. And there was time: fifteen minutes when no firewood needed tending in a kitchen stove; one whole hour when no sheets or overalls needed slapping or scrubbing on a washboard; ten minutes gained because no rug needed to be beaten, no curtains pinned on a stretcher; two hours because food lasted and therefore could be picked or purchased in greater quantity. [...] The humming, throbbing and softly purring gave the women time. (*Paradise* 89)

That time enabled the women to indulge in gardening, but even gardening is stripped of its usefulness in Ruby. The women find pleasure in filling their yards with flowers and relatively few vegetables. “Husbands complained of neglect and the disappointingly small harvest of radishes, or the too short rows of collards, beets. The women kept on with their vegetable gardens in back, but little by little its produce became like the flowers—driven by desire not necessity,” Morrison writes (*Paradise* 89-90).

While most of the women in the novel—both those in Ruby and those at the Convent—are associated with food and nourishment, the domestic activities of the women of Ruby have been rendered useless. When we first meet Dovey Morgan, she is awake at night. To clear her mind she thinks of everyday things like what she will cook for supper the next day. “Not much point to garden peas,” she thinks, noting that her husband has lost the ability to taste anything other than the hottest peppers (*Paradise* 81). On her wedding day she worried that she would never be a good enough cook to satisfy Steward, but it is no longer a concern since years of tobacco use have killed his taste buds. Morrison writes,

Almost always, these nights, when Dovey Morgan thought about her husband it was in terms of what he had lost. His sense of taste one example of the many she counted. Contrary to his (and all of Ruby’s) assessment, the more Steward acquired, the more visible his losses. [...] In 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk their land to a toy ranch, and he lost the trees that had made it so beautiful to behold. His hairline and his taste buds faltered over time. Small losses that culminated with the big one: in 1964, when he was forty, Fairy’s curse came true: they learned neither could ever have children. (*Paradise* 82)

Soane, also, is shown in a nurturing role, and is described by her husband Deacon as keeping a “good home,” doing “good works everywhere,” and being “more generous than he would have liked” (*Paradise* 112-13). But Soane, like Dovey, is childless. Her two sons were killed in Vietnam, and her third pregnancy, a daughter, resulted in a

miscarriage. Deacon notes that “Soane was burdened with the loss of two sons; he was burdened with the loss of all sons. Since his twin had no children the Morgans had arrived at the end of the line” (*Paradise* 113). With no children, there is no one to pass knowledge down to, no one to remember what has happened to them and their parents and grandparents.

When acts of domesticity become driven by desire only, when it ceases to be a necessity for growth and continuation, it is no longer a ritual. Without a need to create order out of chaos (Ruby’s very nature is orderliness), and without the passing down of knowledge that is necessary for continuation, a house cannot become a home. Ruby, rather than providing a home for its people, becomes a silent, still shrine. If the Oven was built to memorialize what the people of Haven had done, Ruby was built to memorialize Haven. Reverend Misner points out that

Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and great-grands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates. (*Paradise* 161)

Standing in complete opposition to everything Ruby represents is the Convent. Built by a wealthy landowner and called by the men of Ruby an “embezzler’s folly,” the

mansion was built to be his playground (*Paradise* 3). With eight bedrooms, two bathrooms, a giant kitchen, a game room, and a cellar and store rooms as big as the first floor, “he must have planned to have a lot of good-time company in his fortress,” as Morrison writes (*Paradise* 71). Judging by the large kitchen and the décor, his method of entertaining obviously involved food and sex. No expense was spared. Gold light fixtures, door knobs, and faucets were shaped to form both male and female genitalia. Stone walls, marble floors, and isinglass windows keep the temperature inside cool on hot summer days. We are told that the embezzler managed “one voluptuous party” before he was arrested (*Paradise* 71).

Fear of being caught was evidently a factor when the house was constructed. Everything about the architecture of the house speaks to the rich man’s terror. It is shaped like a live cartridge, “curved to a deadly point at the north end,” where all of the first floor windows “huddled” in the living room and dining room (*Paradise* 71). The southern end of the house, the flat end, contains the large kitchen and game room. Between the two ends of the house is a grand entrance with one marbled foyer leading into another. The entrance is guarded by “some monstrous statuary” presumably meant to inspire awe and frighten would-be attackers (*Paradise* 71). On the second floor, the two giant bathrooms are at opposite ends of the house with the eight bedrooms laid out between. The bedroom windows face east only, creating a misleading light.

After the embezzler’s arrest, the house was purchased and converted into a school where Arapahoe girls “learned to forget” (*Paradise* 4). Under the management of the nuns who ran the school, the living room was turned into a chapel, the dining room into a school room, and the game room into an office. They replaced the bathroom fixtures with

plain ones, painted over the mirrors in the bathrooms, and destroyed or hid any other things that hinted at “the embezzler’s joy” if it was possible to do so (*Paradise* 4). Some things they were not able to eliminate, so images of religion and martyrdom share the same space as images of sexuality and indulgence.

During the time frame of the novel, the school has dissolved and all that remains of the nuns is the old mother superior and Consolata, who had been stolen in Brazil by the nuns and brought up in the Convent. Consolata is eventually joined by Mavis, a young mother running away from her abusive husband after accidentally killing two of her children. Grace, or Gigi, arrives next, embodying overt sexuality and looking for love. She arrives shortly after the mother superior has died. Seneca, abandoned by her mother and running away from abusive foster homes, follows Gigi. Finally, Pallas is brought to the Convent after being betrayed by her mother and lover and then raped while running away. For these hurting women, the Convent becomes a home. It is a place of safety and a haven from the pasts from which they are running. Recovering from hurts inflicted by men, they find the Convent to be “permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too” (*Paradise* 177).

We first see the Convent through the eyes of the men invading it, outsiders who seek to destroy it because they don’t understand what it has become for the women who live there. They spread throughout the mansion, “taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides [there] and the yeast-and-butter smell of rising dough” (*Paradise* 4). In their exploration of the Convent, we see that it is a place replete with domestic ritual that is both meaningful and necessary. Even the invaders recognize



the activities taking place there as being full of meaning, although they interpret those meanings to suit their own ends. As the narrative steps back in time in the following chapters, we gain insight and understanding of the actual meaning of these activities as we learn what they mean to the women who enact them.

At the heart of the domestic ritual at the Convent is the character Consolata. It is she who first found and cultivated the peppers that grow only on Convent land, and she who began to sell them to passers-by and the townspeople of Ruby, along with bread, barbecue sauce, eggs, hot relish, chickens, and other produce. Thanks to her efforts, the Convent is a productive, self-sufficient home. Roberta Rubenstein writes that Consolata “functions as the figure who links—and comes to embody—secular and sacred conceptions of *mother*, *home*, and *Paradise*” (142). In Consolata, whose name means “consolation,” we are able to see how a house is transformed into a safe and healing home through the acts of domestic ritual.

The four young women who come to live at the Convent arrive broken in spirit, hungry for love and attention, and looking for a place to belong and be safe. While they each arrive in different ways, they all find that their needs are met there. First, their physical needs are met; upon arrival, they are each given what they most need, whether it be food or rest or both. When Mavis arrives, Consolata sets before her a cup of coffee and a bowl of steaming, buttered potatoes, which she rapidly eats, not even aware that she is hungry. Gigi, given the command to watch and wait while Consolata sleeps, helps herself to the funeral food left by the women of Ruby after the mother superior’s death and then sleeps “deeply and long” (*Paradise* 73). Seneca follows Sweetie, one of the women of Ruby, to the Convent, is given food by Mavis and Gigi and then shown to a

place where she can sleep. When Pallas is brought to the Convent by Billie Delia, one of Ruby's young women, she is given space to cry and rest and allowed to be silent. She is offered food, but is unable to eat it until she has spoken to Connie and shared all that has happened to her. For each of these women, that initial meal indicates safety and acceptance and is the first step in the healing process.

To these women, Connie is a mother figure, providing nurturance for their bodies and forgiveness for their souls. For it is more than just physical nourishment that these women find at the Convent. Their spiritual needs are also met there. In the chapter titled "Consolata," we see the transformation that each of these women undergoes under the guidance of Consolata. In this chapter, Consolata herself undergoes a transformation, waking from years of drunkenness to realize with disappointment that she had not died and that she is surrounded by "broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying," girls with "foolish babygirl wishes" (*Paradise* 222). She finds new strength by remembering her past and drawing on the foundation given to her by Mary Magna, and she grafts onto that foundation a spirituality shaped by domesticity. She begins to cook, to prepare a meal for the girls and as she spreads it before them, she says, "I will teach you what you are hungry for. [...] If you have a place [...] that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there, then go. If not stay here and follow me" (*Paradise* 262). None of the women elect to leave, and so, over the next days, weeks, and months, they undergo a complete transformation. Rubenstein writes, "As the women in the Convent gain power over their private demons and come to accept themselves and their bodies, Consolata instructs them in the inseparability of body and spirit" (153). Under the guidance of

Consolata, the women change and are “no longer haunted” (*Paradise* 266). The domestic rituals enacted by Consolata have created order out of chaos, and peace out of fear.

Through the healing ritual of Consolata, the terror of the womens’ past lives is replaced with a sense of calm, the emptiness replaced with “a sense of surfeit” (265). The cellar, once a place for storage, becomes a place for remembering and forgetting as the women trace their bodies on its floor and decorate the outlines with symbols of their past. In writing all of their sorrows into these alternate bodies, the women empty themselves of their pain. “Life, real and intense, shifted to down there in limited pools of light, in air smoky from kerosene lamps and candle wax” (264). The cellar becomes a storage place for their pasts; and, at the same time, the kitchen becomes the place where they live out their new lives. The kitchen, the center of all things domestic, plays just as large a role in their healing process as the cellar, as it is the place where they gather for the meals Consolata prepares for them as well as the place where they prepare the foods they sell. These places of domesticity become places of healing and safety.

Ruby has been a safe haven for its inhabitants, but in closing itself off to the rest of the world, it has grown stagnant. Its people are either incapable of reproducing like Steward and Dovey Morgan, or are capable of bearing only sickly children like Jeff and Sweetie Fleetwood’s babies. Where once families were large, they now have only one or two children. The younger generation has turned against the older, refusing to pay homage to Ruby’s past. According to young Billie Delia, Ruby is “a backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where” (*Paradise* 308) The older generation looks for someone to blame for the corruption seeping into their town. They see “in lively, free,

unarmed females the mutiny of the mares and so [get] rid of them” (*Paradise* 308). The Convent, too, has been a safe home, and unlike Ruby, it has been an open, welcoming home. It has been a place of healing for the women who live there. As Pallas observes, it is a “protected domain,” a place where “she might meet herself [...], an unbridled, authentic self” (*Paradise* 177). Where Ruby has shut out the rest of the world, the Convent has ignored it and forgotten it. The women’s gazes have turned too far inward and so they don’t recognize the danger that threatens them. When Lone DuPres warns them of the men’s intentions, they yawn and smile.

What do you do when your home is threatened, when everything you have worked to establish seems to be falling apart? In *Paradise*, we see two very different reactions. The founders of Ruby, recognizing that their town has been corrupted, place blame on the women of the Convent, claiming that they brought in the filth they had worked so hard to keep out. Lone DuPres, eavesdropping on their plans, notes, “When the men spoke of the ruination that was upon them—how Ruby was changing in intolerable ways—they did not think to fix it by extending a hand in fellowship or love. They mapped defense instead and honed evidence for its need, till each piece fit an already polished groove” (*Paradise* 275). And so they attack the women.

And the women, in return, try to run. If we consider *Paradise* to be one of the “narratives of departure” that Janis Stout writes about in *Through the Window, Out the Door*, we can find that narrative in the story of the Convent women. They have all run away from or escaped abusive and neglectful homes and have found safety at the Convent. They believe that their journey is complete. Having been cleansed of their pasts, having been baptized in a purifying rain that washed away “any recollections of a recent

warning or intimations of harm,” these women have been made new and whole (*Paradise* 283). They have found themselves and no longer have any need to run, so they ignore Lone when she warns them. When the men attack, the women realize that their journeys are not over. As the men take aim, they are running, “like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game” (*Paradise* 18). They are running to preserve their lives, but what happens next is never clearly defined. When Roger Best arrives at the Convent with his hearse, expecting to find three bodies in the field, one in the kitchen, and another in the hall, he finds nothing. “Even the Cadillac was gone” (*Paradise* 292). When Anna Flood and Richard Misner go to the Convent to investigate, they sense in the garden a door or a window, some opening to an unknown world. This door or window is hinted at in the chapter titled “Grace,” when Connie asks Gigi what her name is. Morrison writes, “If ever there came a morning when mercy and simple good fortune took to their heels and fled, grace alone might have to do. But from where would it come and how fast? In that holy hollow between sighting and following through, could grace slip through at all?” (*Paradise* 73). And, in a moment of grace, the women slip through that door or window, and in the final, unnamed chapter, we see each of the four young women, Mavis, Pallas, Seneca, and Gigi, giving closure to their pasts. While at the Convent they cleansed themselves of the hurts and ghosts of their pasts, their departure from the Convent has given them a chance to put those pasts to rest, to either forgive those who have been deemed worthy of forgiving, or to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant. With that closure, the women are now truly complete.

The people of Ruby and the women of the Convent are trying to create a home for themselves by creating a paradise in which they, considered outsiders by the rest of the world, belong. In the interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Morrison says,

[*Paradise*] was my meditation, if you will, and interrogation of the whole idea of paradise, the safe place, the place full of bounty, where no one can harm you. But, in addition to that, it's based on the notion of exclusivity. All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in. [...] Isolation, you know, carries the seeds of its own destruction because as times change, other things seep in, as it did with Ruby. (pars. 6, 8)

Ruby, by neglecting to provide a nurturing environment, remains only a house, lacking the domestic, nurturing, productive properties of home. Built with the intention of being a paradise, it succeeds in achieving the isolation, but that isolation is its downfall. The other things that seep in destroy the peace and safety of Ruby, and peace and safety are requirements of paradise. The Convent, on the other hand, by offering a nurturing, healing home environment, becomes a way of escorting its inhabitants into a paradise where the women are both forgiven and forgiving, safe and saved.

It is easy to judge the town of Ruby as a failure. Richard Misner does so, asking, "How can they hold it together, [...] this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders?" (*Paradise* 306). According to him, they have betrayed everything they set out to do in the beginning. But, just as the women of the Convent experienced a moment of grace that allowed them to overcome their past, the town of Ruby is given a chance to experience

grace, as well. Deacon Morgan feels remorse for what happened at the Convent, telling Misner that he has become “the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different” (*Paradise* 302). He recognizes that he has “a long way to go” to overcoming his shame (*Paradise* 303). Misner himself comes to realize that even though the town has failed in its original mission, it can still be redeemed, it can still be a safe, healing, saving home. Presiding over the funeral of Save-Marie Fleetwood, the youngest child of Sweetie and Jeff, Misner asks, “Any other messages hiding in your name? I know one that shines out for all to see: there never was a time when you were not saved” (*Paradise* 307).

The novel closes with a younger woman (we can only assume by the description of “tea brown hair” and “emerald eyes” that it is Consolata) resting in the embrace of Piedade, a woman of whom Consolata has told stories to the girls (*Paradise* 318). Piedade is singing, and her song evokes “the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home—the ease of coming back to love begun” (*Paradise* 318). It is, perhaps, a song of the journey made by the women of the Convent, leaving home to find what home really is and coming back to start a new life. As Piedade sings, she watches a ship coming into port, full of passengers “lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time” (*Paradise* 318). Like the women when they arrived at the Convent, these passengers are looking for the consolation of home. Perhaps these passengers are the people of Ruby who have been irrevocably changed by the raid on the Convent, the flawed and beautiful and ultimately redeemable people Richard Misner has come to love. If anyone needs a home, a paradise, it is the people of Ruby. For now, though, “they will

rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise”

(*Paradise* 318).



### CHAPTER III

#### LANDKEEPING AND HOUSEKEEPING IN LOUISE ERDRICH'S *TRACKS*

In an essay titled "The Names of Women," Erdrich writes of discovering the names of her grandmothers and great-grandmothers and of using those names and also photographs to uncover their identity, which she found to be centered in the home and the work done there. This became a way for Erdrich to explore her own identity, which she says is grounded in an "urge to get home" (qtd. in Quinlan 258). In "Ritual Circles to Home in Louise Erdrich's Character Names," Eileen Quinlan writes that Erdrich expresses this identity "not in the sewing, beading, farming and housework that her foremothers did, but in writing" (258-59). In writing, Erdrich finds a way to return home, just like the characters whose stories she tells. As we will see, for many of these characters, their identity is bound up in the way they define and relate to home.

In a discussion on Erdrich, Jeannette Batz Cooperman writes, "The American land was never wilderness, it was home. [...] Erdrich once explained that the freedom of open space 'is there but it's nothing that someone stays in. People aren't 'lighting out for the territory.' The women in my books are lighting out for home'" (67). That return to home is a central theme in Erdrich's writing. Most of her novels are interconnected, telling the stories of families and characters who are related to each other and who live in the same community, characters who create homes that they repeatedly leave and return

to. Erdrich is of both Ojibwe (also called Chippewa or Anishinaabe) and German descent, and her novels focus on the people of both heritages. For her Ojibwe characters, leaving home and returning to it becomes an important step in their development.

In “Native American Novels: Homing In,” William Bevis writes that many novels by white Americans focus on leaving home but that Native American novels focus on returning home. He writes, “In Native American novels, coming home, staying put, contracting, even what we call ‘regressing’ to a place, a past where one has been before, is not only the primary story, it is a primary mode of knowledge and a primary good” (582). In Erdrich’s novels, a character’s relationship to home helps to define his or her identity. Finding home, leaving home, or returning home becomes a part of each character’s spiritual quest. While many of her works show this, I will be focusing on her novel *Tracks*, which is one of the first books she wrote but the third that was published.

There are two stories being told in this novel. Nanapush, one of the oldest men still living on the reservation, narrates the story of Fleur Pillager and his past interactions with her, directing his story to Fleur’s daughter Lulu in an effort to reunite mother and daughter. At the same time, Pauline Puyat tells the story of how she came to be the nun Sister Leopolda. Woven into her story are stories of Fleur. In these stories, we see the tensions between the traditional Ojibwe lifestyle and the new white, Catholic lifestyle, tensions that can be seen in far more ways than in just the interactions between these two characters and the groups they come to represent. Through Nanapush and Pauline and the characters whose stories they tell, we see different ideas of what home is. As we look at houses and housekeeping in this novel and the ways each character contributes to these things, we see the differences between a healthy and a failing home. We find that those

who hold onto traditional beliefs are those who are most capable of creating a nurturing home environment.

Bevis uses the word *homing* to show the focus on home and on returning to home in Native American cultures (585). He writes that homing is complex: "Tribalism is not just an individual's past, his 'milieu' or 'background.' Tribe is not just lineage or kinship; home is not just a place. [...] 'Identity' for a Native American, is not a matter of finding 'one's self,' but of finding a 'self' that is transpersonal and includes a society, a past, and a place" (585). Homing, then, could be taken to mean a way of grounding oneself in home and the things that make up home. For Bevis, society, past, and place are key components of home. While the past is certainly important in Erdrich's works, she seems to place more emphasis on community and land as being integral parts of what makes a home. For the Ojibwe people we see in her novels, the houses in which they live are not nearly as important as the land and the community. Their identity is tied into their ability, or inability, to relate to a home made up of these things. In "Dimensions of Homing and Displacement in Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*," Jill Jepson writes that "a place becomes a home only through the presence of people" (26). In the case of the Ojibwe, the people who make up the home are not just immediate family members, but the entire tribe. Through the tribe, respect for the land is maintained. Nanapush says in *Tracks* that "land is the only thing that lasts life to life" (Erdrich 33). Land and community are interconnected, with each one sustaining the other.

Erdrich presents several houses in *Tracks*, from Nanapush's "small tightly tamped box" overlooking the crossroads (Erdrich 4), to Fleur Pillager's cabin on the haunted

shores of Lake Matchimanito, to the two-story house of the mixed-blood Morrisseys where Pauline Puyat takes up residence. Most of these houses are purely functional, providing shelter and privacy, telling us very little about the people who inhabit them. The cabins of Nanapush and Fleur are small and have only one room, and there is no delineation between masculine and feminine space. Their homes reflect their simple lifestyle and their adherence to traditional Ojibwe beliefs. Larger houses on the reservation, like the house of the Morrisseys, reflect a turning away from Ojibwe customs and an embracing of white culture. While we can learn these things by looking at the houses, we can learn more by looking at the land on which these houses stand.

Jepson writes that “the control of land lies at the crux of *Tracks*. The essential tension of the novel is not merely between the interests of white corporate entities and those of the Anishinaabe but between two visions of how land should be used” (32). Those two visions come from the Ojibwe themselves and fall along the lines of traditional customs upheld by certain characters versus the encroaching white customs being embraced by other characters. People who uphold traditional beliefs, like Nanapush and Fleur, believe that the land should be taken care of and respected. They recognize that their survival depends on the land and work to keep it and protect it from outside influences. Other people, such as the Morrisseys and the Lazarres, view the land as a commodity, something to be sold in order to gain social and financial security. One of the problems in *Tracks* is that these two visions of how the land should be used create a split in the community.

Where the land was once communally shared, a government treaty has divided the reservation into allotments given to each family, creating a shift in the way people think

about the land. Previously, land was not owned by anyone, and it certainly wasn't something you had to pay for in order to live on it. The new government treaty requires families to pay taxes for their allotment, but it also gives them the option of selling their land for money or for food, an option some people choose to take. Nanapush says,

Starvation makes fools of anyone. In the past, some had sold their allotment land for one hundred poundweight of flour. Others, who were desperate to hold on, now urged that we get together and buy back our land, or at least pay a tax and refuse the lumbering money that would sweep the marks of our boundaries off the map like a pattern of straws. Many were determined not to allow the hired surveyors, or even our own people, to enter the deepest bush. They spoke of the guides Hat and Many Women, now dead, who had taken the government pay. (Erdrich 8)

As the land is divided and sold, the same lines that divide the land begin to divide the community into separate groups: those who sell out and those who don't, those who give in to white influences and those who maintain the traditions of the Ojibwe. Jepson writes, "The loss of home through relocation and destruction of Anishinaabe territory has shaken the community to its roots; conversely, weakened community cohesion contributes to further loss of Anishinaabe land" (27). Weakened land and weakened community weakens the home and leaves it vulnerable to attack.

Nanapush most completely represents tradition and the old ways. In him, we can see the importance of the land in the lives of the Ojibwe. He defines himself in terms of the land, saying, "I guided the last buffalo hunt. I saw the last bear shot. I trapped the last beaver with a pelt of more than two years' growth. I spoke aloud the words of the

government treaty, and refused to sign the settlement papers that would take away our woods and lake. I axed the last birch that was older than I” (Erdrich 2). His connection to the land is deeply intimate. As the land is stripped bare, as the trees are claimed by loggers, he feels the loss in his soul. “I heard the groan and crack,” he says, “felt the ground tremble as each tree slammed earth. I weakened into an old man as one oak went down, another and another was lost, as a gap formed here, a clearing there, and plain daylight entered” (Erdrich 9). Because of this connection, he is able to see that the government treaty will cause the destruction of his people. When Father Damien visits with a map to show the current situation, Nanapush takes note:

We examined the lines and circles of homesteads paid up—Morrissey, Pukwan, Hat, Lazarres everywhere. They were colored green. The lands that were gone out of the tribe—to deaths with no heirs, to sales, to the lumber company—were painted a pale and rotten pink. Those in question, a sharper yellow. [...] My concern was the lapping pink, the color of the skin of lumberjacks and bankers, the land we would never walk or hunt, from which our children would be barred. (Erdrich 173)

His concern is preserving the land and making sure that the children and grandchildren of the tribe will have a home.

Pauline Puyat serves as a character foil for Nanapush. Where he upholds the traditional ways, she turns against them. She describes herself as wanting to be different, wanting to be white. Unlike Nanapush, who calls the tribe by the name they called themselves, Anishinaabe, Pauline uses a white term for her people, Chippewa, immediately aligning herself against the tribe. She says, “I wanted to be like my mother,

who showed her half-white. I wanted to be like my grandfather, pure Canadian. That was because even as a child I saw that to hang back was to perish. I saw through the eyes of the world outside us. I would not speak our language. [...] 'I was made for better'"

(Erdrich 14). At her request, her father sends her to live with her aunt in Argus, where she imagines she will learn lace-making from the nuns, but instead finds herself sweeping the floors of the local butcher shop and caring for her younger cousins.

Pauline shows a complete lack of regard for the land of her people. It is not that she sides with those who would sell the land for food or profit; land simply does not register as something of importance to her. In her final chapter, we see the one comment she makes regarding the land:

It is said that a surveyor's crew arrived at the turnoff to Matchimanito in a rattling truck, and set to measuring. Surely that was the work of Christ's hand. I see farther, anticipate more than I've heard. The land will be sold and divided. Fleur's cabin will tumble into the ground and be covered by leaves. [...] The trembling old fools with their conjuring tricks will die off and the young, like Lulu and Nector, return from the government schools blinded and deafened. (Erdrich 204-5)

She shows no remorse for the eventual loss of land and sees it as a fact of assimilation into white culture.

Finally, Fleur Pillager, whose name means flower in French, is the most mysterious of Erdrich's characters. While her first name is fairly innocuous, her last name is not. She is a member of the Pillager clan, people "who knew the secret ways to cure or kill" (Erdrich 2). They are a clan both feared and respected by the rest of the tribe.

Fleur and her cousin Moses are the last of the Pillagers, and it is through Fleur that the clan will continue. Despite the fact that she is one of the central characters of *Tracks*, we actually know very little about her. We know that she upholds traditional beliefs, living in the woods by herself and refusing to speak English, and that she has immense power. Her spirit name remains hidden, as does the full extent of her powers. Eileen Quinlan writes, “Since Erdrich claims that women’s names ‘told us who they were,’ her decision to conceal the truest name of the woman known as Fleur suggests that her identity, her spirit power, must remain out of the reach of ordinary people” (266). Everything we learn about Fleur in this novel, we learn through the observations of other characters.

She has a connection to the land that is greater than that of Nanapush. In a sense, she is a human representation of the land on which she lives. Early in the novel, Nanapush describes this place, saying, “The water there was surrounded by the highest oaks, by woods inhabited by ghosts and roamed by Pillagers” (Erdrich 3). When Nanapush goes there with Edgar Pukwan after Fleur’s family has died, Pukwan tries to burn the house, “but even though he threw kerosene repeatedly against the logs and even started a blaze with birchbark and chips of wood, the flames narrowed and shrank, went out in puffs of smoke” (Erdrich 3). Once Fleur takes up residence in “the house that even fire did not want” (Erdrich 8), it becomes a place where people who come looking for furs on the land get lost and die. Despite the fact that most people think it is haunted by ghosts of dead Pillagers and that the water monster Misshepeshu lives in the lake, Fleur’s piece of land is alluring. “We couldn’t resist hunting there. The oaks were big and the bush less dense, the berries thick and plump, the animals seemed fatter and more tender. People went there although they didn’t want to meet the dead or the living,” Nanapush



says (Erdrich 35). The land mirrors Fleur's own mysterious allure that both draws and frightens people. Later, when fees are once again owed on the land, Fleur says that "no one would be reckless enough to try collecting for land where Pillagers were buried. [...] They won't dare throw us off the shores of this lake" (Erdrich 174, 175). It is partially pride that makes her say this, but also the knowledge that most people fear the lake.

If we read the land as a house in *Tracks*, then the preservation of the land becomes a means of housekeeping. And, with the emphasis placed on community, the preservation of family and community also becomes a means of housekeeping. We know from the first page of *Tracks* that the Ojibwe community and land is failing. Nanapush says, "We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die" (Erdrich 1). Disease has come to the Ojibwe, and that combined with the government treaty and the selling off of the land threatens the entire community. "On the reservation, where we were forced close together, the clans dwindled. Our tribe unraveled like a coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and new among us were taken," Nanapush tells his granddaughter (Erdrich 2). Nanapush himself has lost his entire family; his wives and children have all died of the consumption that has spread across the reservation. Fleur is found still alive in her family's cabin while the rest of her family is dead. Pauline also loses her family, with her father, mother, and sisters dying of disease. Each of these characters begins the novel separated from community and seeking a way to survive. Through the rituals of housekeeping, each finds that way.

Just as space within the house is not designated as male or female space, so domestic rituals are not given to just one gender. Both men and women are engaged in these activities, which, for the Ojibwe culture, includes hunting, trapping, cooking, sewing, and a host of other activities. While in *Tracks* we generally see women cooking and men farming or hunting, there are some men, like Nanapush, who cook, and some women, like Fleur, who hunt. In this culture in which land and community comprise the home, housekeeping activities are activities that preserve both land and community. With both failing, housekeeping, or landkeeping, is an act of survival and thus something in which everyone must participate regardless of gender.

Family and community are clearly important to Nanapush. He says, "Before the boundaries were set, before the sickness scattered the clans like gambling sticks, an old man never had to live alone and cook for himself, never had to braid his own hair, or listen to his silence. An old man had some relatives, got a chance to pass his name on, especially if the name was an important one like Nanapush" (Erdrich 32). Family provides not only comfort and companionship, but also continuance. For Nanapush, a child on which to confer the family name, a child to teach the ways of the land, ensures that his name will be passed on and that he will be remembered. He recognizes that connections between people are important and understands that because he saved Fleur's life, their lives are now connected. Where others in the tribe might be frightened of having a connection with Fleur, Nanapush embraces that connection and welcomes Fleur into his home. Through her, he creates a new family, and throughout the novel gathers to the two of them additional family members. Eli Kaspaw becomes Fleur's lover and possibly the father of her daughter Lulu (although Nanapush makes sure his name is on

her birth certificate, ensuring that his name will be carried on). Eli's mother Margaret eventually becomes Nanapush's lover, and with her comes her youngest son Nector.

Nanapush understands the connection between land and survival, knows that it is only by the provender of the land that he can live, and so he pays great respect to the land and the creatures that live on it. He is an expert hunter, for as he says, "I think like animals, have perfect understanding for where they hide, and in my time I have tracked a deer back through time and brush and cleared field, to the place it was born" (Erdrich 40). The spiritual connection Nanapush has with the land allows him to guide Eli Kashpaw in spirit and song as he tracks a moose in the middle of both winter and famine. When Eli is successful (thanks to Nanapush), his hunt provides food for both Nanapush, who at this time is still living in his own cabin, and for Fleur and Lulu, currently living alone by the lake.

Providing for his family, for his community, sometimes means Nanapush must confront his enemies. Named for the Ojibwe trickster Nanabozho, Nanapush is a trickster himself, and so he uses the resources he has at hand to stay ahead of his enemies. Late in the novel, after he has become actively involved in a feud against the Morrisseys and Lazarres, Nanapush says,

One day, in spite of the head shaving and the death of Lazarre, in spite of Sophie keeling over outside Fleur's cabin, I took Nector with me and together we set foot on Morrissey land. Who would ever think such a thing would happen? And yet we old-time Indians were like this, long-thinking but in the last, forgiving, as we must live close together, as one people,

share what we have in common, take what we're owed, for instance

Napoleon's last cow. (Erdrich 180)

While he manages to get food for his family, he also uses this opportunity to teach his granddaughter, Lulu. Describing the squalor that the Morrisseys are living in, he says to Lulu, "This picture was the start of what happened to the Morrisseys. They lost status as the years went on, as the bitterness between our families deepened. The will to plant and harvest deserted them. They ceased to keep their books and breed their stock in their rush to breed each other. Granddaughter, if you join this clan, I predict the union will not last" (Erdrich 182). In this, Nanapush shows his community building impulses again. The point of his storytelling is to reconcile Lulu and her mother and to guide Lulu into making smart choices.

These are not the only ways Nanapush finds ways to care for his family. After the death of Fleur's second child and the discovery that far more money was owed on the land than any of them could afford, he sees that Fleur has lost a part of herself. "I am a man, but for years I had known how it was to lose a child of my blood. Now I also knew the uncertainties of facing the world without land to call home. I recognized the signs in Fleur [...]. It was my idea that a cure, an easing, must take place," he says (Erdrich 187). He calls on his Ojibwe heritage and the knowledge of Fleur's cousin, Moses Pillager, to initiate a healing ritual. The ritual has some very domestic elements. It requires a knowledge of herbs that could be blended to make a paste that will allow Nanapush to reach into boiling water to pull out a piece of meat. Fleur was to eat that meat and drink a brew prepared especially for the recipe. Together, these things are meant to help her find

her way again. Because the ritual is interrupted by Pauline, we don't know if the ritual helps, or if, as Nanapush suggests, being able to pay the fee helped.

Throughout all of this, we see that Nanapush engages in traditional ways of taking care of his home and the people who live there. For him, tradition is just as important a part of his home as the land and community are. Staying true to his heritage is his way of being at home in the world and of identifying himself. While he attended a Jesuit school as a boy, once he returned to the reservation, he never left again, and never had a reason to. His identity is so completely connected with the land and with his history and with his community that to leave would be to forsake who he is and to forsake everything he holds dear. At least in the part of his story that we see in *Tracks*, protecting the land and his people is the reason he exists.

In Pauline, we see something completely different. She has very little regard for the land or her people. However, despite her insistence on distancing herself from her own family, she is a lonely girl, hanging onto the edges of community. During the winter she spends in Argus, she dreams of her mother's and sister's deaths, and says, "I tried to stop myself from remembering what it was like to have companions, to have my mother and sisters around me, but when Fleur came to us that June, I remembered. I made excuses to work next to her, I questioned her, but Fleur refused to talk about the Puyats or the winter" (Erdrich 15). In these words, in the ways in which she follows Fleur around Argus, and in other instances throughout the novel, we can see that Pauline longs to be a part of a community, to be invisible and overlooked no longer. The community she wants to be connected with is the white community, but she remains invisible to that group as well. Jepson writes, "Pauline is even less at home among whites than she is living with

the Anishinaabe. Although she moves to Argus hoping to find a place for herself, she is no more a part of the community there than she was on the reservation” (29). She tries to ingratiate herself to the nuns at the convent by denying that she is Ojibwe. She believes that Christ has visited her and told her that she “was not one speck of Indian but wholly white,” and that she “should not turn [her] back on Indians” (Erdrich 137).

Pauline’s longing for community leads her to attach herself to people, but the people she chooses to associate with are those whom she perceives to have power. She recognizes that Fleur is powerful and tries to befriend her but fails, and later, when Pauline decides to leave Argus, she believes that Bernadette Morrissey and her family have a certain amount of power. “They were well-off people, mixed-bloods who profited from acquiring allotments that many old Chippewa did not know how to keep” (Erdrich 63). Pauline’s alliance with Bernadette opens up new doors to her, introducing her to a life in which she can earn a place in the community and setting her on the road that ultimately leads to the convent. Becoming the older woman’s apprentice, accompanying her to the deathbeds of the villagers, Pauline ushers the living to their deaths. Although she gains a role in the reservation community, her lack of respect for that community keeps her from truly becoming a part of it. She is looked down on by other characters, Nanapush and Fleur especially, with whom she attempts to maintain a relationship. In the end, the only place she can find is in the convent. Even after she has become a nun herself, she is never fully accepted by her sisters. We see in other books that she is feared and held in awe by the other nuns.

Pauline’s housekeeping is destructive at best, but contains some ritualistic elements nonetheless. While she participates in some housekeeping activities, her

purposes are to destroy community rather than build it. She would rather see her people converted to Catholicism or dead. As Bernadette's assistant, she participates in the rituals associated with preparing the dead, rituals that involve many domestic elements.

I scrubbed and waxed far into the night, polished whatever poor nickel plate trimmed their stoves, chopped wood, kneaded and then baked the bread that the living would put into their mouths. I learned [...] the way to arrange the body, the washing and combing and stopping of its passages, the careful dressing, the final weave of a rosary around the knuckles.

(Erdrich 69)

Despite the meticulous way she prepares the dead, she at first cares nothing for them. "It was no matter to me what happened after life," she says (Erdrich 69). Later, once she has entered the convent, she has a vision in which it is revealed that she has brought the souls of the dead she has tended to Christ and that her mission is to bring more to him. Pauline clearly disdains the ways of her people, and seeks to bring an end to those ways. She seeks to open the door to the new ways by destroying the old ways. And so, when Nanapush holds the healing ceremony for Fleur, Pauline is present and disrupts the ceremony. She uses her Catholic beliefs to twist the things she does, claiming that hers are the actions of one dedicated to bringing souls to Christ. If it is his will that the Ojibwe people be destroyed, then she will be the one to do it. She challenges Fleur and the lake monster in one final contest before entering the convent but succeeds only in killing Napoleon Morrissey, her former lover.

If Pauline's housekeeping is ultimately more destructive than nurturing, her maternal instincts are equally so. When she discovers that she is pregnant, she attempts to

about the child, only to be stopped by Bernadette. After the child is born, she looks once at the child and then refuses to have anything to do with her. Later, when Pauline confronts the lake monster, Bernadette brings the girl, called Marie, to the shores of the lake in an attempt to convince Pauline to give up her quest. But Pauline says, "I was forgiven of responsibility by Christ in the flesh. The child [...] was thin as a rake, her black hair was wild as a tree in leaf, but they had left her that way just to tempt me, I knew, and I was not moved or swayed" (Erdrich 198). Nothing could move her to pity the child she no longer regards as her own. We know from *Love Medicine* that Pauline meets her daughter again and that Marie is literally scarred by the encounter, so even later in life, Pauline continues her destructive ways.

In contrast to both Pauline and Nanapush, Fleur does not intentionally seek community, but it finds her nonetheless. Just as her land draws people, so does she. Nanapush is the first to offer her a place to stay, but she prefers to live alone by the lake. Pauline seeks her company, but Fleur scorns her. Even when Eli Kashpaw comes calling, believing himself to have been bewitched by her (which is quite possible), she turns him away several times before finally giving in to his advances. Eli makes his home at Fleur's cabin, and after she gives birth to Lulu, whose father remains a mystery, the three of them form a family together. Eventually Eli's mother and brother move to the lake, followed by Nanapush. When their land is threatened, they pull together to raise the money necessary to pay the fees. Despite her apathy for community, she manages to create a nurturing family environment that draws others.

As a housekeeper, Fleur is very competent, and she must be because she is the person on whom the continuance of that family depends. Jepson writes that Fleur



becomes a force for community cohesion. She provides not only for her daughter but also for the other members of her new clan. She works hard to preserve the strength of the reservation by trying to save her own land from the lumber companies. [...] From the independent girl who eschewed reservation mores, she has been transformed into a woman who contributes all her resources to community cohesion. (31)

While hunting appears to be something that men typically participate in, Fleur is an expert hunter fully capable of providing for herself. There are rumors that she hunts in the bodies of other animals, and as a Pillager it is probable that she does. Pauline says, “We know for sure because the next morning, in the snow or dust, we followed the tracks of her bare feet and saw where they changed, where the claws sprang out, the pad broadened and pressed into the dirt. By night we heard her chuffing cough, the bear cough” (Erdrich 12). Throughout the novel, we also often see her cooking for her family, or caring for her daughter. She shows many more maternal qualities than Pauline does, taking care to make sure Lulu is both well-fed and well-clothed as well as loved.

When she loses a baby in childbirth and when her land is threatened, however, things begin to change for Fleur. She becomes overprotective of Lulu, never letting the girl out of her sight. She dreams of a path in the woods bearing deer tracks, but when Eli goes out to hunt, he returns home empty-handed. Even her physical appearance begins to change; she has become gaunt and ragged, “wild as the day I wrestled her as Pukwan looked on in fear,” Nanapush says (Erdrich 170). He recognizes that her powers have failed her. “Power dies, power goes under and gutters out, ungraspable. It is momentary, quick of flight and liable to deceive. As soon as you rely on the possession it is gone”

(Erdrich 177). Without that power, Fleur finds herself unable to take care of her family or her land. Nanapush says,

It now seemed what was happening was so ordinary that it fell beyond her abilities. She had failed too many times, both to rescue us and save her youngest child, who now slept in the branches of bitter oaks. Her dreams lied, her vision was obscured, her helper slept deep in the lake, and all her Argus money was long spent. Though she traveled through the bush with gunnysacks and her skinning knife, though she worked past her strength, tireless, [...] Fleur was a different person than the young woman I had known. (Erdrich 177)

Because her power has failed her, power that enabled her to care for her family in a way that no one else could, she has changed. In the end, we see that the changes in Fleur have given her a strength she previously lacked, and her powers return as she performs one final act of housekeeping that will protect her land.

Fleur's little clan is able to earn and save enough money to pay fees on all of their allotments, but when Nector goes into town to make the payment, he betrays them all by putting all the money on the Kashpaw land. The Pillager land is sold to the lumber company, and the family is broken apart. The loss of community together with the loss of land signifies a loss of home, which is a loss Fleur does not intend to accept. While she leaves her home at the end of this novel, she does so in such a way as to make the land around her home very unwelcoming to outsiders.

We are never given a reason for why Fleur left the reservation the first time. All we know is that she ended up in Argus working with Pauline at Kozka's Meats. And we know that when she returns to her cabin by the lake, she tells Nanapush that she should never have left. Her second leaving is much more remarkable than her first. Nanapush, looking back, realizes he should have seen what she was planning.

There were signs I never thought of as signs—the axe she'd obviously stolen, the edge of sawtooth metal jutting from beneath the house. Many times I had to wait for her when I visited, and when she emerged from the woods she was trailed by cats. Small mounds of sawdust drifted on the path I took. Woodchips littered the ground. Often I smelled the spilled sap of pine. (Erdrich 218)

Later, we learn what these signs pointed to. After she sends Lulu away to the government school, Nanapush visits Fleur and is witness to what happens. By this time, many of the trees have been forested, and as Nanapush walks to the cabin, he notices “the ugliness, the scraped and raw places, the scattered bits of wood and dust, and then the square mile of towering oaks, a circle around Fleur's cabin” (Erdrich 220). When he arrives at the cabin, men from the lumber company are there trying to convince her to leave. Fleur pulls Nanapush into the circle of her land and exerts her power in an effort to protect her home. As a wind rises, one by one, trees begin to fall. “With one thunderstroke the trees surrounding Fleur's cabin cracked off and fell away from us in a circle, pinning beneath their branches the roaring men, the horses,” Nanapush says (Erdrich 223). After the trees have fallen and the men have fled in fear, she loads a small

cart and leaves. It is a passionate and defiant act, made to defend the things she holds most dear, her home and her family.

We know from other novels that when she leaves this time, it is to get revenge on the people who took her land. In *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, we also learn that she regrets this second leaving as well because of the way it severed her relationship with her daughter. From these other novels, we also know that she does eventually return to her cabin, and Nanapush's story in *Tracks* is being told to Lulu in the hope that she will understand why her mother left.

Throughout the stories of these three characters, Nanapush, Pauline, and Fleur, we see the importance of home and the tensions between the old ways and the new. But there is one other story being told: that of Lulu, the girl sent away from home, who is a significant character in several other Erdrich novels. In Lulu the old ways and the new are combined. Raised to cherish and embrace the old ways, she is sent away to the government school for her own protection, but while there she receives an education in the new white ways. In the last pages of *Tracks*, Lulu returns home, and with her return, a sense of home is restored for Nanapush. Watching her run across the train station to join him and Margaret, he says, "Lulu. We gave against your rush like creaking oaks, held on, braced ourselves together in the fierce dry wind" (Erdrich 226). She is a Pillager and a Nanapush, and so in her resides all of her mother's and Nanapush's hope for the future, a future that we do not see in *Tracks*, but that is shown to us in other books.. When we see her in *Love Medicine*, she is the wife and lover of many men and the mother of just as many children. She becomes a champion for the old traditions and helps others find ways

to use those traditions to survive in the modern world. Lulu, more than any other character we see in *Tracks*, finds a way to be at home in both worlds.

## CHAPTER IV

### KEEPING HOUSE IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING*

Marilynne Robinson began writing *Housekeeping* as an experiment in extended metaphor. "She began with an image of a grandfather finding a watch on a lake shore; then came a grandmother hanging laundry on a line. There were people in these descriptions and the passages were firmly connected to place, namely the wild, deep woods and darkly vegetative lakeshores of rural Idaho," Regan Good writes (par. 1). A student of Shakespeare and nineteenth-century American literature, Robinson was drawn to the language of these writers and to their use of extended metaphor. While she did not originally intend to write a novel—she was completing a doctoral dissertation at the time—she began to see that these extended metaphors she was experimenting with belonged together (Good par. 9). From those early writings rose *Housekeeping*, a novel in which trains and boats become metaphorical vehicles for the home, and in which the natural landscape becomes a metaphor for transiency.

One of the things Robinson sought to do as she wrote *Housekeeping* was to write a story about the West, particularly about the part of the West where she grew up, which was Sandpoint, Idaho. In an interview with Thomas Schaub, she said, "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" (233). In an

essay titled “My Western Roots,” she writes of how people often see Westerners as being without culture or intelligence, and of how she wrote *Housekeeping* in part to demonstrate the “intellectual culture” she experienced as a child (par. 7). “I used [Ruth] to record the intellectual culture of the West as I experienced it myself,” she writes (par. 10). The allusions Ruth makes throughout the novel to Carthage, to Emily Dickinson, to the Bible, all come from stories that Robinson herself was taught in school and at home. More than just showing the intellectual culture of the West, she also wanted to give a more complete picture of the West and the way Westerners think. She writes, “It was in fact peculiarly western to feel no tie of particularity to any one past or history, to experience that much underrated thing called deracination, the meditative, free appreciation of whatever comes under one’s eye, without any need to make such tedious judgments as ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’” (par. 4). She asserts that certain ideas that might have negative connotations in other parts of the country have distinctively positive connotations in the West, citing the idea of loneliness as an example. She writes,

I remember when I was a child [...], 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 among 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.

(par. 12)

Throughout the novel *Housekeeping*, we see examples of this kind of loneliness and communion with nature. The novel is, in fact, a meditation on loss, loneliness, and exile; however, the negative feelings we often associate with these words are transformed into something that is achingly beautiful. Loneliness becomes associated with individualism, a state that Robinson seems to praise. In “My Western Roots,” she writes, “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 for [...] this idea is the western hero, the man of whom nothing can ever really be known” (par. 19). In *Housekeeping*, she presents the reader with this idea, but she twists it by offering a female hero in the character of Sylvie, a woman who is described by other women in the book as an “itinerant,” a “migrant worker,” and a “drifter” (31). She has no home, but wanders from place to place, riding the rails and finding odd jobs as needed. Through Sylvie, the reader is given a feminine alternative to the wandering male hero. But through her, we are also shown that this novel, in being a meditation on loss and lonesomeness, to use Robinson’s word, is also a meditation on home—on what it means to be at home and to leave it.

*Housekeeping* follows the story of two young girls whose mother leaves them on their grandmother’s front porch and then drives her car off a cliff into the lake. They are then raised by a series of female guardians, including their grandmother, two great aunts, and finally Sylvie the wanderer, their mother’s sister. With all the changes in guardians, the one thing that remains constant is the house in which they live, although the house itself undergoes many changes as it is kept by these various women. Throughout the



novel, the idea of housekeeping is positioned alongside, but not against, the idea of transiency. While each of the girls ultimately chooses between the two ideas, with Lucille, the younger sister, choosing a life devoted to housekeeping and Ruth, the narrator, choosing a life of drifting with her aunt, Robinson lays out the story in such a way that neither choice is privileged. For these sisters, their different choices result in a separation from family, which is one of the most important elements of home.

Many critics see *Housekeeping* as being about breaking free from feminine subjectivity, associating the act of housekeeping with imprisoning patriarchal traditions. In an essay titled “Burning down the house? Domestic Space and Feminine Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*,” Paula Geyh writes that housekeeping

is the social process of sustaining the structure of the household, of the family, and by extension the structures of traditional society. And most importantly it is a process of constituting a settled and enclosed subjectivity within those structures of house, family, and society. In this schema, the house is the ideology of the patriarchal family made concrete.  
(109)

If, like Geyh, we equate housekeeping with the preservation of a patriarchal society, then Ruth and Sylvie’s decision to leave signifies an escape from an imprisoned existence. Such a reading demands the view that the house in which the girls live is what Geyh describes as the patriarchal “father-house” (105). She states that a house can still be patriarchal even in the absence of a father, and that the house in this novel remains patriarchal until the arrival of Sylvie. I disagree with her assessment; I believe that even

when Edmund Foster was alive, his house was not the well-kept father-house Geyh describes it as. It was not built as a patriarchal structure, nor was Edmund an especially patriarchal figure, as we will discuss later.

*Housekeeping* is “about coming to a new understanding of shelter and the ideology of the home,” as Jacqui Smyth writes in “Sheltered Vagrancy in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*” (281). It’s about understanding that home is not a static thing, that it is ultimately transportable. Home cannot be confined to the walls of a house. But, as we see, neither can transiency be limited to the out-of-doors. Ideas of home and transiency become mingled in this novel as the boundaries between outside and inside dissolve. We see this in the house, in the metaphors that present mobile structures like trains and boats as houses, and in the rituals of housekeeping that are enacted within the house. With these things playing such a large role in the novel, it is important to take note of boundaries and perimeters, as they are something that Robinson herself draws attention to. In describing the terrain of the town of Fingerbone, she writes,

There are mountains, uncountable mountains, and where there are not mountains there are hills. The terrain on which the town itself is built is relatively level, having once belonged to the lake. 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. (*Housekeeping* 4-5)

Most of the novel is concerned with how boundaries dissolve, creating those “puzzling margins.” When we apply these ideas to the house built by Edmund Foster, and to the

other shelters presented throughout the novel—and there are many of these—we gain an understanding of the transmutability of home.

From the house Edmund Foster builds on a hill for his wife, Sylvia, to the temporary shelter Ruth and Lucille build by the lake to the caved-in house Sylvie and Ruth visit in the mountains, we find a variety of homes and shelters. Beyond these physical structures, the natural landscape is also given the properties of houses, particularly the lake and the woods, and, as mentioned previously, the house is frequently compared to boats, and trains function as a continuous symbol for mobility. Each of these “houses” defines and then redefines home.

At the center of *Housekeeping* is the house Edmund Foster builds in Fingerbone, Idaho. Built on a hill on the edge of town, it is a testament to the family’s independence. As Ruth says, “Our whole family was standoffish. This was the fairest description of our best qualities, and the kindest description of our worst faults. That we were self-sufficient, our house reminded us always. If its fenestration was random, if its corners were out of square, my grandfather had built it himself, knowing nothing whatever of carpentry” (*Housekeeping* 74). It is a house with many oddities, but it also accommodates those oddities. The sloping bedroom floor is compensated for by the furniture built with uneven legs. The floor of the downstairs hallway has such a steep slant that a step is built into the middle of it. And Ruth points out that the stairs to the second floor

terminated oddly in a hatch or trapdoor, because at the top of the stairs one came face to face with a wall so essential to supporting the roof (which had always sagged somewhat in the middle) that my grandfather could not

bring himself to cut another door in it. So instead he had worked out a device with pulleys and window weights that made the trapdoor (which was left over from the time when the second floor was merely a loft with a ladder up to it) rise at the slightest push and then fall shut again of its own accord with a little slam. (*Housekeeping* 47-48)

The house has changed over time. What was originally a loft became a second floor for the children's bedrooms. Over time the house "shifted and settled" (*Housekeeping* 48). These irregularities and changes point to the instability of the house while at the same time reflecting the personality of Edmund himself. His wife, Sylvia Foster, hopes that someday he might acquire "a little more stability and common sense" (*Housekeeping* 10). Without stability, the house, and Edmund, lack any kind of patriarchal authority. And with his death, this home becomes a very matriarchal environment as it is solely inhabited by women. In this way, it is very similar to the environment in which Marilynne Robinson grew up. In the Thomas Schaub interview, she says, "When I first started writing *Housekeeping* [...] 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 own 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 [West]" (233). That femaleness pervades the novel and the house.

Under Sylvia's keeping, the house is a benign place, quiet, peaceful, serene. It is a nurturing environment in which Sylvia makes sure her daughters' needs are met while giving them room to grow up as independent women. She never intrudes in their lives in the hope that they will be able to separate their lives from her own. While it seems that

such a method of mothering would allow the girls to develop into strong, independent women, as Robinson writes, Sylvia “had never taught them to be kind to her” (*Housekeeping* 19). The girls do become independent women and they leave home, but they do so in such a way as to cut off almost all ties with their mother. Molly becomes a missionary, and Helen and Sylvie both marry men they each only bring home once in order to make their marriage official in their mother’s eyes.

With Edmund’s death, the first boundary of the Foster home is broken. “That event had troubled the very medium of their lives,” Robinson writes. “Time and air and sunlight bore wave and wave of shock, until all the shock was spent, and time and space and light grew still again and nothing seemed to tremble, and nothing seemed to lean” (*Housekeeping* 15). While the broken border seems to heal “as seamlessly as an image on water,” (*Housekeeping* 15) that image is misleading. The girls leave home without maintaining a tie to their mother, and a second boundary breaks. Sylvia’s death breaks yet another, so that when Sylvie returns the boundaries that define the house are already starting to melt, and the house is already starting to fade into the margins. Under Sylvie’s keeping, the remaining boundaries fade entirely.

Sylvie’s return to Fingerbone coincides with one of the worst floods in the town’s history. Even the Foster house, which usually only collected little pools of water in the basement during floods, was filled with water. The flood washes away all sense of boundaries and perimeters that the town holds. As she looks out the door, Lucille comments that the neighbor’s house isn’t where it used to be, to which Sylvie replies, “It’s so hard to tell” (*Housekeeping* 65). The lake groans and cracks as its covering of ice

melts, and in the darkness it seems to Sylvie that it is the end of the world, and to Ruth that everything has disappeared.

When we did not move or speak, there was no proof that we were there at all. The wind and the water brought sounds intact from any imaginable distance. Deprived of all perspective and horizon, I found myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and my aunt to something less than that. I was afraid to put out my hand, for fear it would touch nothing, or to speak, for fear no one would answer. (*Housekeeping* 70)

The flood is a precursor to what will follow under Sylvie's housekeeping, which Geyh describes as being "based on the dissolution rather than the preservation of the boundaries between the indoors and the outdoors" (105). Over time, the house begins to fade even more into the margins, becoming a sort of in between place, where it is not completely indoors nor completely outdoors, becoming "attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of weather" (*Housekeeping* 85). Over time, more of the outside finds its way into the house. Leaves blow around in the corners, and there were "crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic" (*Housekeeping* 99). The house eventually falls into such disrepair that Ruth remarks, "If the house were not to founder, it must soon begin to float" (*Housekeeping* 125).

This is just one of many instances in which Robinson uses the metaphor of a boat in discussing the house. Sylvie is compared to a "mermaid in a ship's cabin," revealing her uneasiness indoors (*Housekeeping* 99). The kitchen table resembles "the clutter of ordinary life on the deck of a drowned ship" (*Housekeeping* 102). While these statements

liken a house to a ship, the most telling statement is one that makes a Biblical allusion.

Ruth says,

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 lettuce patch was of no use at all, and a good foundation was worse than useless. A house should have a compass and a keel.

*(Housekeeping 184)*

A house should be capable of moving, Robinson seems to be saying. Home should have the ability to change and adapt. These ideas reflect transient values.

We see more of the ideals of transiency in some of the other shelters that are portrayed throughout the book. In this novel in which home and homelessness are both considered, the world outside the house becomes just as important as the world inside. Images of the natural world described in domestic terms abound. The lake in the summer is “a place of distinctly domestic disorder, warm and still and replete,” with things accumulating on the surface, “as they do in cobwebs or in the eaves and unswept corners of a house” (*Housekeeping* 113). Waves “slipped and slapped and trickled, insistent, intimate, insinuating, proprietary as rodents in a dark house” (*Housekeeping* 164). The woods “are as dark and stiff and as full of their own odors as the parlor of an old house” (*Housekeeping* 98). Beside these natural house-like elements are set impermanent structures built by people.

Camping on the lake shore one summer evening, Ruth and Lucille build a shelter of driftwood and a rock, using fir limbs to make a roof and floor. “It was a low and

slovenly structure, to all appearances random and accidental,” Ruth says (*Housekeeping* 114). Lucille writes her name in pebbles in front of the door, staking her claim on the little piece of land on which they have built. Their sleep that night is uneasy, and when they wake to complete darkness, they realize that creatures have crept down to the lake and prowl close to their shelter. Lucille refuses to accept “that all our human boundaries were overrun,” Ruth says (*Housekeeping* 115). In contrast, Ruth sits quietly in the darkness. “While it was dark,” she says, “despite Lucille’s pacing and whistling, [...] 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” (*Housekeeping* 116). In the darkness, Ruth realizes that boundaries don’t exist; that even the walls of a shelter dissolve.

This scene points toward one that follows shortly after Lucille has left Sylvie’s house, when Sylvie takes Ruth across the lake to visit a place that she describes as pretty. “There’s a little valley between two hills where someone built a house and planted an orchard and even started to dig a well,” she says (*Housekeeping* 137). This little house and orchard in the valley serves as an opposite image of the little house and orchard on a hill that Edmund Foster built for his family. While the Foster house still stands strong and sturdy, the house in the valley has collapsed and been abandoned. It is a foreshadowing of what happens to the Foster house when Ruth and Sylvie try to set fire to it prior to leaving. And, it is an image of yet another boundary-less house.

In this novel, the domestic acts of housekeeping show the ways in which different characters relate to houses. After Edmund’s death, Sylvia’s housekeeping creates a time



of “almost perfect serenity” for her and her three daughters (*Housekeeping* 13). She initially performs “the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith” that everyday activities like housekeeping will become ordinary again (*Housekeeping* 16). The years between the time of Edmund’s death and the time that the first daughter leaves home are quiet years devoted to routine. “Cut free from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, [and] advancement,” which seem to be strictly male pursuits in this environment, Sylvia and her girls order their lives around creating and caring for their home, which are very feminine pursuits (*Housekeeping* 13). It is obvious that Sylvia is very good at housekeeping and mothering. For her, it is truly a way of creating order out of chaos, of bringing peace to troubled lives. She is described in language reminiscent of the woman renowned as a housekeeper and mother in Proverbs 31 of the Bible. Robinson writes,

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.

(*Housekeeping* 11-12)

When Helen leaves her daughters, Ruth and Lucille, on Sylvia’s front porch, Sylvia finds herself settling once again into the routine of raising girls, and doing it very well, in Ruth’s estimation, even for one grown so old. Early in the novel, Ruth

demonstrates a sensitivity for understanding other people. While she recognizes that her grandmother cared for her well, she also recognizes her grandmother's limitations. Ruth says,

She cared for us like someone reliving a long day in a dream. Though she seemed abstracted, I think that, like one dreaming, she felt more than the urgency of present business, her attention heightened and at the same time baffled by an awareness that this present had passed already, and had had its consequence. (*Housekeeping* 24)

It seems that life with their grandmother could have provided Ruth and Lucille with a semblance of normalcy; however, she dies after the girls have lived with her for only five years. At that time, Lily and Nona, Sylvia's unmarried sisters-in-law, move into the house and become guardians of the girls. When the great-aunts realize that they are unable to care for the girls, they pass that responsibility on to Sylvie, Edmund and Sylvia's youngest daughter. Under Sylvie's care the house and the girls undergo the greatest transformation.

It is Lily and Nona who describe Sylvie as an "itinerant," a "migrant worker," and a "drifter" (*Housekeeping* 31). When she appears at the house one evening, everything about her suggests vagrancy. Although it is late winter and snow is still on the ground, she is wearing a short-sleeved dress with loafers and a raincoat "so shapeless and oversized that she must have found it on a bench" (*Housekeeping* 45). The following morning, the girls find Sylvie sitting in the dark kitchen wearing her coat and eating crackers out of a small cellophane bag. Even after she has announced that she will stay and watch over them, she maintains some of her transient habits, causing the girls to fear

that she will leave. She sleeps on a bed with all of her clothes on, including her shoes, with all of her personal belongings in a box under the bed, she keeps money pinned to the underside of her coat collar, and she constantly tells stories of people she met on trains, other transients like herself. While Lucille hates Sylvie's transient nature, Ruth finds her aunt's quirks reassuring. "It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave," she says (*Housekeeping* 103).

Sylvie's housekeeping reflects her transience. Although she "talked a great deal about housekeeping," her methods are rather unorthodox (*Housekeeping* 85). Windows and doors are left open and the davenport is dragged outside for the sake of air. "Thus did she begin by littles and perhaps unawares to ready it for wasps and bats and barn swallows. [...] She soaked all the tea towels for a number of weeks in a tub of water and bleach. She emptied several cupboards and left them open to air, and once she washed half the kitchen ceiling and a door," Ruth says (*Housekeeping* 85)

Their meals consist of eggs, soup and sandwiches, and canned foods, the tin cans of which Sylvie begins to collect, stacking them in window sills and along counters. She prefers to eat dinner with the lights off, enjoying the darkness. "She seemed to dislike the disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a worldful of darkness," Ruth comments (*Housekeeping* 99). One night Lucille, beginning to grow exasperated with Sylvie's strangeness, turns on the light:

The window went black and the cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone before as this world from the primal darkness. We saw that we ate from plates that came in detergent boxes, and we drank from jelly glasses [...]. Lucille had startled us all,

flooding the room so suddenly with light, exposing heaps of pots and dishes, the two cupboard doors which had come unhinged and were propped against the boxes of china. The tables and chairs and cupboards and doors had been painted a rich white, layer on layer, year after year, but now the last layer had ripened to the yellow of turning cream. Everywhere the paint was chipped and marred. A great shadow of soot loomed up the wall and across the ceiling above the stove, and the stove pipe and the cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust. (*Housekeeping* 101)

The light also reveals a burned curtain which had caught fire when Sylvie placed a birthday cake covered with candles too close to it. It leaves them feeling uncomfortable, as the light throws into stark relief the shortcomings of Sylvie's housekeeping. During this time, the relationship between Ruth and Lucille becomes more tense, as Lucille begins to align herself more with the townspeople and Ruth is drawn more and more to Sylvie. Eventually Lucille chooses to leave home and move in with the home economics teacher, and Sylvie's housekeeping becomes even more erratic. She begins to collect newspapers, stacking them along the parlor walls, until they cover the fire place. There is no need to keep the parlor neat because nobody visits them. Ruth notes that "Sylvie only kept them, I think, because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift" (*Housekeeping* 180). With this accumulation of newspapers and tin cans, mice begin to be a problem, so Sylvie brings home a cat that litters twice, leaving them with "thirteen or fourteen" cats that "prey on the swallows"

and “often brought the birds into the parlor, and left wings and feet and head lying about, even on the couch” (*Housekeeping* 181).

Even though Sylvie’s housekeeping is so extraordinary, it is nonetheless a loving, nurturing sort of housekeeping. To the degree that she is able, she does try to provide for the girls’ needs, even if she does not entirely understand what those needs are. She buys them little trinkets and clothes and shoes that gradually fade and wear out over time. “To her the deterioration of things were always a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on,” Ruth says. “However a day’s or a week’s use might have maimed the velvet bows and plastic belts, the atomizers and gilt dresser sets, the scalloped nylon gloves and angora-trimmed anklets, Sylvie always brought home treasures” (*Housekeeping* 94). In doing these things, she attempts to fill the void left by the girls’ mother’s death, but even so, she is unable to disregard the habits left over by transience. It is those habits that Lucille finds unforgiveable. Sylvie’s years of living on the road have made her oblivious and forgetful of society’s mores and expectations. While she becomes a mother figure for Ruth, she fails Lucille, who responds to Sylvie’s erratic housekeeping with a flurry of cleaning and an insistence on proper meals. When that doesn’t work, she chooses to move in with the home economics teacher, a woman who can provide the order that Sylvie cannot. In the end, it is not Sylvie’s housekeeping that is questioned by the members of the town, but her ability to be a proper mother to Ruth.

Throughout the novel, Ruth becomes progressively more of a transient herself, in thought if not in actuality. It is while sitting alone in the valley across the lake that Ruth

begins to think about loneliness and family and the meaning of home. All it takes, she realizes, is relationship, or family, to feel comfortable and at home.

Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them. [...]

Anyone with one solid human bond is that smug, and it is the smugness as much as the comfort and safety that lonely people covet and admire. I had been, so to speak, turned out of house now long enough to have observed this in myself. Now there was neither threshold nor sill between me and these cold, solitary children who almost breathed against my cheek and almost touched my hair. (*Housekeeping* 154)

It is these solitary thoughts that make it possible for her to leave with Sylvie at the end of the novel. By comparing herself with the invisible children Sylvie imagines live in the woods, Ruth comes to understand how she could become one of them. She also cannot help comparing the caved in house to the house in which she lives. "I imagined myself in their place—it was not hard to do this, for the appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother's house was deceptive," she thinks.

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. [...] It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall. It is better to have nothing. (*Housekeeping* 158-59)

Things, belongings, create an image of belonging to a specific place. Books and couches and pianos are very homely, or housely, items, things that are not easily moved from one place to another. They suggest stability and staying in one place for a long period of time. And yet, Ruth points out, it is a deceptive stability, for these things can contribute to the destruction of a house just as easily as they contribute to its solidity. They are weights that hold one down. They represent everything that Sylvie is not.

Returning home from their journey across the lake, Sylvie and Ruth ride a freight car back to Fingerbone, and for that, they are condemned. "Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient of me," Ruth says (*Housekeeping* 177). Several visits from the sheriff and well-meaning church ladies lead to discussions of what is best for Ruth. Sylvie insists that "families should stay together," and so begins her effort to conform to proper housekeeping (*Housekeeping* 186). She removes the newspapers and tin cans from the parlor, but Ruth recognizes the futility of her actions, saying, "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" (*Housekeeping* 188). And of course, it doesn't work. The sheriff visits one last time to tell them that there will be a hearing, and so Ruth and Sylvie realize that they must leave in order to keep their family together.

Their escape from Fingerbone is not an escape from the demands and expectations of traditional society. It is not an escape from housekeeping. Sylvie's efforts to conform to society's expectations show a willingness to live under society's rules if it will keep her and Ruth together. "Those days she cast about constantly for ways to conform our lives to the expectations of others, or to what she guessed their expectations

might be,” Ruth says (*Housekeeping* 201). And so it is that leaving home is ultimately a preservation of family, for “it is a terrible thing to break up a family” (*Housekeeping* 190). Janis Stout writes that, “Ruth and her Aunt Sylvie not only give up housekeeping and give up keeping to houses, they forego what might be called the mentality of houseness. But they do not give up the mentality of shared relationship and mutual caring. They define their being as a permanently shared, or familial, vagrancy” (22). Ruth and Sylvie both understand that family is the most important thing and that as long as they are together, they will be at home. And so they set fire to the house and walk across the railroad bridge over the lake, “and there was an end to housekeeping” (*Housekeeping* 209).

The novel ends on a somewhat melancholy note. Ruth and Sylvie are together, but Ruth’s final thoughts in the novel are of Lucille. While she is content in her wandering, she realizes that she will not be whole until she is reconciled to her sister. She imagines the same for Lucille, picturing her sister in the house Ruth and Sylvie left behind. She imagines that Lucille waits for their return, looks for them in places where they are not. But there is hope of a reconciliation, for Ruth has come to understand hope, and she has come to believe in a world made whole. If we read this novel as being narrated by an adult Ruth looking back at her childhood, there are several passages that point to an indestructible optimism that gives Ruth the ability to survive. Despite all the losses in her life—a grandfather and father she never knew, a mother who died too early for them to really know each other, a grandmother who did her best to provide a home, and a sister who can’t understand her—Ruth still believes that reconciliation is possible. As she



thinks of her missionary aunt, she asks, “For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular anonymous afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?”

(*Housekeeping* 92). And later in the novel, when Ruth sits at the abandoned, caved-in house in the valley, she thinks,

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? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole.

(*Housekeeping* 152-51)

And closer to the end of the novel, she says, “The first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and a return” (*Housekeeping* 192). All of these passages draw the reader on to the end of the book where Ruth tells the story of how she and Sylvie left Fingerbone. Just prior to this episode, she narrates the Biblical story of the Fall, the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, all of which point to reconciliation. “God Himself was pulled after us into the vortex we made when we fell, or so the story goes,” she says. “And while He was on earth He mended families” (*Housekeeping* 194). As the novel draws to a close, we see Ruth hoping that her family will be mended, that she will be reconciled to her sister, to her mother, to her grandmother, and even to the grandfather she never knew.

Throughout the novel, we have seen the walls of houses, the boundaries and perimeters that define place, and the margins between inside and outside slowly dissolve, ultimately showing that these things are not important in the development and perception of home. Home, Robinson shows us, cannot be limited to particular boundaries. It is larger than a house, and more enduring, for when a house fails, the values of home, which are centered in family, continue. When a community fails a family, which is what happens when the community of Fingerbone cannot understand the relationship between Sylvie and Ruth, we see that sometimes drastic measures must be taken in order to preserve the family. While the novel ends with the entire family still separated, Ruth's hope for a reconciliation reinforces the idea that family is the most important thing of all. And as long as family is preserved, home can be carried wherever one goes, whether it be over the lake, into the woods, or across the country on a freight train.

## CHAPTER V

### HOME IN THE LIVES OF CONTEMPORARY WOMEN

“Home is not a little thing,” Toni Morrison writes in *Paradise* (213).

“Families will not be broken,” Marilynne Robinson writes in *Housekeeping* (194).

“Land is the only thing that lasts life to life,” Louise Erdrich writes in *Tracks* (32).

And Roberta Rubenstein writes, “Not merely a physical structure or a geographical location but always an emotional space, *home* is among the most emotionally complex and resonant concepts in our psychic vocabularies” (1). Home, as we see in these novels, is not a thing that is easily defined, especially in the lives of women. As Rubenstein points out, modern feminism challenges “deeply-imbedded cultural scripts that defined women in terms of familial and domestic roles,” and views the home as a prison for women “from which escape was the essential prerequisite for self-discovery and independence” (2). However, as we look at these three novels, we see that the home is a sanctuary, a place to return to, a place to protect and defend. This begs the questions: What is the role of the home in the lives of contemporary women as it is shown in fiction? And have contemporary writers found a way to reconcile the home in the lives of women? As we review the three elements of home discussed in the first chapter and how they play out in the novels of Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson, we can perhaps find answers to those questions.

Houses serve to locate the home in a specific place. In these novels, we see a variety of houses. A house can be a town like Morrison's *Ruby*; it can be a place that has belonged to a specific family for many generations as we see in both Erdrich's and Robinson's novels; or it can be a place appropriated by people who have no connection, as with Morrison's *Convent*. Whatever shape a house takes, its primary function is to provide protection and shelter for its inhabitants. But, as we see, it can do much more than just that.

In "Reading the House: A Literary Perspective," Mezei and Briganti quote Witold Rybczynski, saying, "The evolution of domestic comfort must be understood in the context of something new in human consciousness: 'the appearance of the internal world of the individual, of the self, and of the family' in which the house is appreciated as a 'setting for an emerging interior life'" (839). In the novels of Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson, the houses we see are not only places of "an emerging interior life," but they also reflect that interior life. The Convent of Morrison's *Paradise* is a place of healing and restoration for the women who come to call it home. Its exterior speaks of the terror of the man who built it, a terror that is also present in the lives of each of the women. Throughout the novel, we see this terror being replaced with peace as the women lay claim to their own lives and reconstruct the domestic places of the kitchen and the cellar into places of healing. Likewise, in Robinson's *Housekeeping*, the Foster house, which was always a symbol of the family's independence, comes to also reflect Sylvie's vagrancy, filling with newspapers and tin cans and becoming the home of sparrows, crickets, and a multitude of cats. It is a place that suggests a borderlessness that typically belongs to wanderers, not to people within houses. The "house" of Erdrich's *Tracks* is

vastly different, being not a house at all but land. Even so, that land plays the same role as houses do in Robinson and Erdrich by reflecting the inner lives of the people who live there. The Pillager land, especially, is a reflection of Fleur's mysteriousness and power.

Houses are merely empty structures without an element of domestic ritual. Domestic activities prolong the life of the home, strengthen the family, and supply healing and safety. Ann Romines writes, "For many traditional women, who have invested much of their selfhood in housekeeping, ritual is domestic, and it is a constant of everyday life. Their ritualized housekeeping may be a sacramental activity that provides essential cultural continuity. But it is also their daily work" (6). When we look at Morrison's town of Ruby, we see that their emphasis on the past rather than the present or the future inhibits continuity. The townspeople's lack of housekeeping for the sake of growth keeps their house stagnant. The Convent, however, is a place steeped in ritual and renewal. Fleur and Nanapush in Erdrich's *Tracks* are also concerned with growth. Their focus is on nurturing and growing life rather than merely sustaining it. Robinson's *Housekeeping* provides a different kind of domesticity, one that seeks to dissolve the borders between indoors and out rather than maintaining them.

In both *Tracks* and *Paradise*, housekeeping also becomes a healing ritual for ailing members of the household. Nanapush guides Fleur through such a ritual in order to help her get over the death of her infant and the potential loss of her land. Consolata also guides the four young women under her care through a ritual in an effort to help them overcome the pain of their pasts. In both cases, an element of domesticity serves as the means of providing healing. Both rituals involve food and creating a shelter in which the acts can take place. For Nanapush and Fleur, that is a physical structure of a tent in which

a safe and holy place is created. For Consolata and the four women, that shelter takes the form of outlines of the girls' bodies into which they can pour their pain. *Housekeeping* does not have a healing ritual as clearly defined as that in the other two novels; however, Sylvie and Ruth's trip across the lake to the abandoned cabin could be considered a healing ritual. Taking place right after Lucille has left, it gives Ruth the opportunity to work through her loss, and it does involve both food—marshmallows brought along to tempt the invisible children out of their hiding places—and a shelter, albeit a caved-in, desolate kind of shelter. Each of these rituals underscore the importance of domestic ritual and nurturance in the life of a home.

While houses and domestic activity can work together to create nurturing, safe, healing environments, we see that sometimes these things are ultimately insufficient. Domestic ritual is not always understood by outsiders, and houses cannot always provide the necessary protection from the threats of those outsiders. When houses fail, their inhabitants must flee. Such is the case in each of these three novels. The departures that these women make are not escapes from domestic prisons into lives of freedom. They are escapes from dangerous situations into unknown futures. The homes of these novels are all threatened by outside forces. The men of Ruby cannot understand the women of the Convent, and so they attack. White culture cannot understand the power of Pillager land, and so it is sold. The people of Fingerbone do not understand Sylvie's nature, and so they threaten to take Ruth away from her. What follows are acts of survival. The women of the Convent flee. Fleur enacts one final show of her power, and then leaves the reservation. Ruth and Sylvie attempt to burn down their house, and then leave Fingerbone. In these departures, the women leave home, but they also take home with them. As Janis Stout

points out, “Women’s writings of travel particularly implicate the home” (5). While these are not travel writings, they are narratives of departure, narratives that hint at travel for the women who leave. In these departures, the home plays an important role, as it is the idea of home that these women are trying to protect.

When these women leave, they carry with them the values of their homes. The women of the Convent, now healed and whole, seek out the mothers, fathers, or children who hurt them and either offer forgiveness or refuse it. While their leaving is the most ambiguous of the three novels, as we don’t know if they survive or are killed or if these reunions are real, imagined, or supernatural, we know that the women run in order to save their lives because they have realized that their lives are worth saving. The home they leave has taught them their own worth and value and they are now empowered to teach others those same lessons. When Fleur leaves her home after bringing down the trees that surround it, she carries very few things out of the forest. She takes rocks from the lake-bottom, an umbrella she had used to shade Lulu, and the grave markers of her family. All of these things point toward her home, being pieces of her land and memories of her family. Because Fleur’s story is continued in other novels, we know that she eventually returns to her land and that she seeks reconciliation with her daughter. Sylvie and Ruth leave home in order to keep their family together. They carry nothing with them other than the clothes on their backs and each other. They have found that nothing is more important than family.

It is important to note that each of these three books take place in times prior to when they were written. Robinson’s *Housekeeping* was published in 1980 although it

takes place in a time reminiscent of the 1950s. Erdrich's *Tracks* was published in 1988 and spans the years of 1912 to 1924. And Morrison's *Paradise*, published in 1997, takes place over a long period of time, beginning in the late nineteenth century and concluding in the 1970s. Despite the fact that these novels take place in earlier times, they are deeply contemporary books, reflecting and responding to the culture and times of the years in which they were written. The issues presented in the books are issues that contemporary audiences can relate to. For women, the issue of the home in women's lives is especially important.

We see in these novels that the home's importance cannot be denied. Ann Romines writes that, "traditionally, housekeeping has been an essential rhythm of most women's lives" (15). That is still true today as contemporary women often balance the rhythm of housekeeping with the cadences of a career. Romines continues, saying, "When readers encounter a literature that acknowledges that rhythm and its complex traditions and imperatives, they find themselves drawing from their own lives and histories in unaccustomed ways" (15). These novels give contemporary readers an opportunity to examine their own lives and to even reimagine those lives, to reposition the home in their priorities. Morrison, Erdrich, and Robinson show us that a life in the home is not a prison-like existence, but they also show us that there doesn't have to be a choice between a life in the home and a life outside of it. Home can be carried with a woman wherever she goes.

The endings of these novels only hint at the possibilities of a home carried out into the world, of the possibilities this new concept of home offers for transformation. These writers don't show the transformations that are possible, but there is hope for them.



We are not told that the people of Ruby find a way to recreate themselves into a home that is both forgiven and forgiving, that can remember the past and prepare for the future. We are not told that Lulu finds a way to forgive her mother for abandoning her, or that Fleur returns to reclaim her land, her home. We are not told that Ruth and Lucille are ever reconciled or that they ever see each other again. But we do know that each of these characters has been given glimpses of what home is and can be, and so we, the readers, have hope that the characters find a way to successfully recreate home in the worlds in which they find themselves.

In these novels, we see that home transcends boundaries. Its essence comes from values of forgiveness, peace, healing, comfort, reconciliation, acceptance, and family, values that are needed not just in the home but in the world beyond. For contemporary women, home can be a specific place, a piece of land or a house, but it is more than that, because home is mobile. When women create homes that are based on these values, they have the ability to transform themselves, their children, and others who come into contact with them. That transformation can take place in the home or outside of it; wherever the transformed woman goes, she takes with her the ability to transform.

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