

Housing and Unhousing Tradition: Linda Hogan's *Power* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

Ildikó Limpár

Linda Hogan's *Power* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* have generated very different discourses, although the numerous similarities between the two contemporary novels, I am convinced, call for an analysis that would place at last the ethnic and feminist interpretations in one house. One of the most striking shared components is a new and surprisingly similar concept of the house, an important yet not very elaborated metaphor in *Power*, and a central metaphor in *Housekeeping*. Furthermore, in both novels the story is narrated in first person singular by a young girl (Omishito in *Power* and Ruth in *Housekeeping*), who aims at following the path marked out for her by a mother-substitute aunt (Ama in *Power* and Sylvie in *Housekeeping*). Both novels present initiation stories of girls; both initiations are, in addition, connected to the choice about a way of life, based on an understanding of nature's role in the world as opposed to that of civilization. As human relation to nature is a central theme in American literature, it is no wonder that both novels appear with the claim of forming part of a new chapter in this old discourse—and this new chapter starts with a novel concept of the house.

The house as social construct traditionally has the role of creating and indicating a material as well as a symbolic boundary between nature and civilization. This role, however, is undergoing metamorphosis nowadays, as the two novels, *Power* and *Housekeeping*, suggest. As Sylvie's housekeeping "is based on the dissolution rather than the preservation of the boundaries between the indoors and the outdoors," Paula E. Geyh identifies Robinson's house as a dissolving house (105). This house does not function in its traditional sense, it does not stand for a barrier against nature; what is more, it becomes the place where nature can present itself in the most demonstrative way when it gets flooded, and provides shelter for animals: "[w]e had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic" (*H* 99), as Ruth remembers.

A similar image of the house is shown in *Power*: as Ama's house is symbolically situated on the borderline between the reservation and the white land, it embodies the border between wilderness and civilization. This house is presented as a living organism, part of the wild and not symbol of the civilized: "moss tries to grow on it and the blue flowers and vines of morning glories climb up it" (*P* 7). The building is so much deteriorated that "[i]t even seems to lean against the plants and trees" (*P* 7), depending on nature's supporting strength so that it should not collapse. Omishito's westernized Indian mother instinctively understands that Ama's house does not fulfill the role houses generally should. The content of the argument reflects the white perspective; the way she puts her opinion, nonetheless, corresponds to the close-to-nature Indian point of view when she claims that "houses are alive things" and that "Ama's house

wants to die” (P 26). This house, it seems, is a paradox: if houses are social constructs against nature’s power, then Ama’s house, metaphorically speaking, does, indeed, want to die: it wants to transform into something that unites with nature as opposed to houses that are built to offer separation from nature. If houses are, on the other hand, really living organisms, they cannot be artificial constructs against the natural; as a result, Ama’s house fulfills its role and should have no death-wish of any kind.

Both houses manifest this seeming opposition: when nature fills the house with life, it naturalizes the social, artificial construct, and thus dooms the original concept and role of the house to die. Instead of marking a clear borderline between the natural and the civilized, these houses merge boundaries: as Sylvie’s house is taken over by the flood, the water emblematically washes away the boundary between the building and its natural environment; as the moss is taking over the walls of Ama’s house, naturalizing visibly performs the unbuilding of the boundary between nature and civilization. The two, originally opposing, entities fuse in the altered houses, reflecting the very process of transformation from one state to another.

To indicate this metamorphosis, the motion, as opposed to the firmness, of the houses is emphasized when the houses meet nature’s power, and the fixed, stable places of dwelling are made to be seen as boats. As Geyh notes, Sylvie’s dissolving house is “a house so linked with water and the forces of dissolution that its synonyms are ‘ark’ and ‘moored ship’” (H 114). In the end, Ruth perceives Sylvie as Noah’s wife (H 204), and their house as reminiscent of Noah’s ark in its function: the house is contrasted with the traditional concept of houses, and the transformation from a firm building to a mobile vehicle that is able to navigate within the elements makes it a shelter for some time in the lost—or, as Hogan would say, “fallen”—world: “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” (H 184).

Similarly to Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, Hogan’s *Power* also shows the house as losing its stability and turning into a sailing boat. At one point during the storm, “open windows [are] like sails on a ship. Like we are going to be blown east and away, and I can see the house carried off by the wind, its curtain sails filled with wind” (P 30). Through Omishto’s association of the house with the ship, Ama’s place, in addition, is connected to the boat Omishto inherited from her father. The boat, which has so often offered her refuge from civilization in nature, thus signifies the father, Omishto’s lost roots, that is, her natural self. The houses from both novels cease to exist as shelters against nature’s destructive force, and become one with nature. They surrender to the elements, just as the aunts do, and also as the girls will after their initiations have been completed.

A further link between the houses and their dwellers can be found in the detail that not only the houses appear as places where boundaries are washed away and two, originally opposing entities may manifest themselves. Also the housekeepers—or,

more precisely, those who let nature keep their houses—are presented in the novels as ones with similarly dual identities. Sylvie in her house is compared to a “mermaid in a ship’s cabin” (*H* 99), allowing us to see her as the meeting point of the human and the animal (that is, the civilized and the natural), while Ama is a halfblood Indian, thus physically and metaphorically combines in her character the natural (Indian) and the civilized (white) identity.

The co-existence of opposing characteristics within the self suggests a kind of transmutation; as a consequence, similarly to the houses, these characters are also associated with movement. Sylvie is a transient being, always on the move, going from one place to another—someone who cannot find her place within fixed borders and cannot come to terms with the house until she completely transforms it. Ama, on the other hand, “was called [. . .] to living halfway between the modern world and the ancient one” (*P* 22-23), as she sees her own role in the world. As far as genes are concerned, she can be considered as a representative of an in-between state in the transforming process from one race to another; symbolically speaking, she is a mediator between the Indian and the white world, a product of a new age that is characterized by the known world turning into another one. In addition to her being a half-blood Indian, a condition that by itself suggests duality within the self, Ama, similarly to Sylvie, is seen as the mixture of the animal and the human on the magical level:

[P]eople were afraid [. . .] that what returned was not really Ama but only looked like her, like a spirit that had changed bodies the way they used to do when people could return to animals and animals could transform themselves into a human shape. And some people said she’d done that, she’d met and married a panther, and now she was an animal come back. (*P* 22)

Both Sylvie and Ama, in whom boundaries cross, are in the role of the initiator in the stories, and the initiations they are in charge of comprise, not surprisingly, crossing borders. In his article on *Housekeeping*, William M. Burke claims that Ruth accomplishes “the expansion of consciousness through a process of border crossings—social, geographic, and perceptual” (717). Actually, these three aspects are tightly connected to one another. A new perception brought into the house by Sylvie changes the traditional function of the house, letting nature take over social constructs. Sylvie does not care about Ruthie’s preference of nature to school, for instance, although this challenges the population of the whole town who feel, as Joan Kirkby points out, that they need to answer the challenge by performing extra housekeeping, and bringing its products—coffee and casseroles—to the house (96). Ruthie’s geographical border crossings in the form of shorter journeys to nature help her acquire Sylvie’s way of perceiving the world, which is new because of a different understanding of the natural and the social. This new perception finally leads to Ruthie’s final border crossing, which is, as we will see, social, geographical and perceptual at the same time.

A similar initiation process is presented in *Power*. Here too the social, geographi-

cal and perceptual border crossings are inseparable: Omishto, whom Ama initiates into her Indian identity, has to make a very clear choice: to live as a westernized Indian, that is, choosing the white way of life, or to accept the traditional Taiga life. That this choice is geographical is obvious, as whites live in the town, whereas the Taiga people live on the reservation. That this choice is also social is clear, too, as the tribal community and its rules are in conflict with the laws of the white society, as especially the court scene demonstrates in the novel. That this choice is equally perceptual is, perhaps, the most difficult to note, though the reader is given ample help by the author: Omishto's name is explained as "The One Who Watches," and her initiation makes her see and understand her experience in a new light. Most importantly, she learns to perceive nature differently, which allows her to accept magic as an existing power, inherent in nature, thus distancing herself from the society she so far has lived in, and nearing a community which is new to her, though her roots can be found there.

The house that blurs boundaries stands for the above described initiation processes, and alludes, at the same time, to the characters who own the house and take the role of initiators. As the initiation can be considered successful in both cases, the houses come to signify the characters of the initiated ones, too. In addition, since the initiation procedure is significantly based on acquiring a novel understanding of (wo)man's relationship to nature and civilization, the house can be symbolically interpreted as tradition in transformation. The house originally represents, on the one hand, man's traditional attitude to nature, and the changed concept of the house signals an alteration in that relation. On the other hand, the American literary tradition that extensively explores the very theme of man's relationship to nature is challenged by these two novels, and the transformed image of the house can act as an apt metaphor for the literary tradition to be renewed.

Robinson and Hogan first deconstruct the original concept of the house in order to renew it by making nature attack the houses, and thus giving them a new function. Renewal through destruction is exactly the method the two authors apply so as to renew the old discourse on nature and civilization in American literature, a theme very much related to the myth of the American Adam in the American garden and, as such, a theme dominant within white male canonized literature. The time for enlarging the scope of this theme and introducing the American Eve in the American garden has come, as these two contemporary pieces indicate.

Critics of *Housekeeping* quickly recognized the text as a feminist rewriting of "a central myth of canonical American literature—that of the young American hero who, like Huck Finn, flees 'civilisation' and 'lights out' for adventures in the wild" (Ryan 81). In revising the American literary tradition, Ruthie's counterpart, Lucille is thus understandably presented as a Gatsby-like character (Kirkby 103).

In *Power*, one can encounter a story that in many respects can be considered as an ethnic—and to a certain extent feminist—rewriting of the same American literary heritage, finding its roots in the Cooperian Leatherstocking novels. Using allusions from canonized literature of the American myth,¹ and subverting these components, Hogan

successfully achieves destroying the myth by renewing it, just as Robinson does.

Renewal through destruction is a central theme in both novels, since nature is presented as a destructive force that also has the potential of restoring what has been destroyed. There is, however, an important dissimilarity between how the two authors present nature's power to renew through destroying, which is reflected in their choices of natural powers to work as destructive and potentially regenerative forces. Hogan's storm applies strong wind and heavy rain, associated with symbolic rebirth: "I crawl back a little, like I am inching my way to a birth through air, laboring" (*P* 34), says Omishto, recounting her encounter with the storm. The purifying wind and rain rob her of the dress she wore, which completes her rebirth. She describes herself as "[n]aked as the day I entered this world and breathed my first breath" (*P* 41), indicating that she herself understands the significance of the event. In contrast to the storm with heavy rain, Robinson chooses stale water to feel nature's transforming effect: Sylvie's house is flooded, which is a result of rain, but the power comes from the gathered water, which is also associated with the town's lake, a most important factor in Ruth's naturalization process. The lake is not presented as regenerative power, it reclaims the town, and in the end "CLAIMS TWO" (sic, *H* 213), as the novel says, suggesting Sylvie and Ruth's death. Liquidity, nevertheless, has the potential of renewal in the novel: becoming liquid is gaining the ability to assume new forms (*H* 27). It is an escape from rigid borders (Caver 128), a transformation that is both destructive because it washes away those rigid borders, and regenerative because it gives way to new forms. The only problem is that these new forms are not to be found in our empirical world.

In Hogan's interpretation, renewal is the positive affirmation of a new identity, which is well definable culturally, socially, geographically, and perceptually. In Robinson's writing, however, the "union with the regenerative powers of decay [is] represented by the dark, dense ever-encroaching powers of the lake and the return to a non-formal or pre-formal state," as Kirkby argues (101). In other words, *Power* explicitly presents regeneration, while *Housekeeping* offers a very ambiguous ending where regeneration has not yet taken a definite shape, although the potential of nature's regenerative power is equally present.

The very idea of regeneration in both novels is connected to the restoration of the world, yet is presented differently. In *Power*, the renewal of the world is a magical act, deprived of its mysticism, as part of Omishto's initiation is to learn and accept that magic does exist, and it can be—should be—integrated into one's reality. The restoration of the world in *Housekeeping*, however, emerges in a more problematic form, since it is connected to the lost world of Carthage:

Imagine a Carthage sown with salt, and all the sowers gone, and the seeds lain however long in the earth, till there rose finally in vegetable profusion leaves and trees of rime and brine. [. . .] Light would force each salt calyx to open in prisms, and to fruit heavily with bright globes of water—peaches and

grapes are little more than that, and where the world was salt there would be greater need of slaking. [. . .] And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole. (*H* 152)

As Carthage, nevertheless, is seen in the context of present-day reality as a world (or part of the world) irrecoverably lost, the possibility of renewal for that world seems to be confined to Ruth's imagination.

In his inspiring article on what the allusion to Carthage may stand for in *Housekeeping*, Gary Williams makes the point that “[t]he perceptual environment that Ruth speaks from bears the same relation to the dominant value system in American culture that Carthage bore to Rome: it is a mystical, dreaming, moon-and-water, death-and-flux-accepting state of mind” (76). Williams understands Sylvie as a Tanit-character, associating her with the divine personification of Carthaginian civilization (74-75). What he does not do, however, is connect the above two statements. Carthage, with her goddess Tanit and her emblem—a crescent within a circle (Williams 74)—stands not only for a minority culture, but also for a culture that is emphatically feminine. This culture opposes a dominant culture; and since “the dominant value system in American culture” Williams talks about is specifically masculine,² the minority culture Ruth represents has all the previously listed “Chartaginian” characteristics partly because it is significantly feminine. “[T]he deconstructing of a unitary, grounded subjectivity and the passing or flowing into a different subjectivity—that of the female transient, the wanderer” is what the novel mainly concerns itself, Geyh argues (113), and this can be perceived as the basis for Robinson's attempt at a feminist rewriting of the white male myth: not only does the novel work on creating a new feminine subject, but this self is a wanderer, which is directly linked with the myth of the American Adam in the American garden.

Just as in *Housekeeping*, the dominant culture in *Power* is associated with the American white male culture, whereas the minority culture is Indian, and significantly female. The “fallen” white culture is represented, on the one hand, by the deceased Abraham Swallow, an alcoholic wife abuser and Omishto's stepfather: two characters whom we do not meet but only hear of. Beside them we see white men in the court scene, who have the power to decide on Ama's innocence or guiltiness (as prosecuting attorney, defense attorney, judge). Besides, it is white men who assist the legislative powers (the translator in court and the police sergeant who took Ama in) or are in the position to form public opinion (the reporter who wants to interview Omishto). In this novel the dominance of the white male culture is seen in two ways: it is white men who have power in the public realm; moreover, white man is able to impose his culture on the minority one in the private spheres, as well: Omishto's stepfather symbolically replaces the girl's deceased biological father, an Indian man, and the result of this change can be measured by the westernized lifestyle of Omishto's mother and sister.

The society dominated by white men is counterbalanced by the Indian society

that represents itself in the novel mostly by female members. The most prominent members of Omishto's tribe seem to be women. The head of the Panther Clan is Old Janie Soto, the oldest person in Omishto's tribe—it is she and another female elder, Annie Hide, who are called in by the whites as witnesses for the trial. The four Indian messengers the girl sees near Ama's place and who lead her to her tribe at the end of the novel are also women—though it is not clear whether they are live people or come from the spirit world. Significantly, Ama is the woman who is most closely associated with the panther woman, and who undertakes the task of restoring the world. As far as Indian men are concerned, only two appear in the novel: the tribe chairman, who voluntarily makes his speech at court in defense of Ama, and Omishto's father, who is dead, whose place is taken by a white man, and who, therefore, is present in Omishto's world only as a sweet memory.

The two worlds each of these novels contrast are presented as possible choices in both cases. Robinson and Hogan lay an emphasis on the character-forming choices their protagonists make by rendering a sister beside both girls, thus contrasting the two alternatives presented. This is a minor device in *Power*, where Omishto's sister is presented as a more westernized character. The same device gains more power in *Housekeeping*, where we can closely follow how the two girls are taking divergent routes in their lives, going as far as choosing various mother-substitutes and ways of life for themselves: Ruthie follows Sylvie and adopts to a transient life, while Lucille, very fittingly, finds her new home in the house of her Home Economics teacher—someone who even has a certificate in the art of housekeeping.

In *Power* we are invited to see the choice about nature versus civilization in terms of ethnicity: Omishto chooses nature, interpreted as Indian identity, over civilization, interpreted as white culture. What this choice is about, however, is very problematic, I think, in *Housekeeping*. We may say that Ruth also chooses nature over civilization, but how can we interpret this choice? As feminist readings of the novel suggest, civilization here appears as a patriarchal society, a society that stands in opposition to nature (Arendt 97-98, Kirkby 97). However, transience cannot be interpreted as a trait of matriarchal society, or any society, for that matter. Transience is *beyond* matriarchy, as the novel suggests. In Kirkby's words, "we see [in *Housekeeping*] a reverse evolutionary process, from patriarchal to matriarchal rule, then to a state of nature" (98). This process, if seen from another angle, leads from belonging to the majority to first becoming a minority, and then non-existent to the dominant culture. Those who are excluded from/by the dominant culture, however, share not a company, but the feeling of separation. Being transient is a lonely experience, even if Ruth does have someone to be on the move with in Sylvie's person, and vice-versa. The relationship they have is based on an intimacy that allows the self to feel that she is on her own even when company is kept for her:

[Sylvie] much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion—a fa-

miliar shape, a familiar face, a familiar silence. She could forget I was in the room. She could speak to herself, or to someone in her thoughts, with pleasure and animation, even while I sat beside her—this was the measure of our intimacy, that she gave almost no thought to me at all. (*H* 195)

Being transient is primarily not a decision *for* something but *against* something, and this fact creates a significant difference between the final effects of the two texts.

Power concludes with Omishto's finding her place in the world, whereas *House-keeping* ends with Ruth's search for her place clearly outside the world, crossing a final border physically or metaphorically, depending on how we interpret the ambiguity the novel leaves us with. Omishto joins a community while Ruth leaves one and, as Christine Caver points out, "since Ruth cannot be accommodated within her own community, she imagines one" (133); her company, thus, is not of this world.

"It is better to have nothing" (*H* 159), Ruth claims, and she acts accordingly when she chooses total denial of what she has had. Nature did a wonderful job in transforming their house into a modern Noah's ark; nevertheless, this mild rejection of the traditional ways is not tolerated by the community they should belong to. As a consequence, they turn to a more aggressive alternative: using again one of the natural elements, fire this time, instead of adapting tradition—the house—to nature, they try to make tradition perish for good. The house, nevertheless, "would *not* burn" (*H* 208)—tradition proves too strong for the two attackers to destroy. Interestingly enough, the readers do get a detailed description of how the flames take over the house and demolish all that it contained, as Ruth imagines all this very vividly while crossing the bridge. Imagination *is* capable of ruining the tradition that has a firm foundation.

Destruction by fire confirms our perception of the house as not only tradition in the general sense, but also as literally tradition. There are two occasions when Sylvie and Ruth set fire to something: first they burn all sorts of papers, including the entire newspaper and magazine collection, almanacs, catalogues, telephone books and literature books (or at least one of the latter); and not much later, when they decide to flee, they set the whole house on fire. They leave to wander together in the intimacy where no words are needed.

Turning the house into their own Carthage, they withdraw their claims on it, letting Rome, that is, Fingerbone, overtake it. Rome made sure that Carthage should never again resurrect—as long as Rome exists. However, though it was unimaginable at a time, the fall of the Roman Empire arrived, and now it is possible—at least in Ruth's imagination—that we will witness the resurrection of Carthage. In the realm of fiction we can even imagine the resurrection of the house—in the way Sylvie and Ruth would find it cozy, too. Nature's power can be destructive: the flood and the fire equally threaten the house. However, it can also be regenerative: in Ruth's world there is a chance for Carthage to revive, while liquidity is the promise of new forms to be taken. If we are inclined to accept the possibility that "the scene of Ruth's writing may be the bottom of the lake" (Caver 132), then the girl's text should be understood as a

presentation of a new form—literature rejecting tradition, having a voice that comes from beyond the world we know.

On the whole, *Housekeeping* suggests, gaining a new perception seems of no use in this world. It demands renouncement in this world and holds out promises of possible gains that are in an unknown realm. Breaking free from boundaries apparently results in the loss of voice, identity, and even corporeality (Caver 130). It suggests the refusal of language and communication with the known world, but I would disagree with Joan Kirkby who sees the novel as “a negative affirmation of the need for art” (107). Ruth’s text proves there is a need for art. Her loss to the world, on the other hand, confirms that the art which she practices is not of this world. Or, at least, not yet. This text does offer the potential of renewal: it regenerates the old myth of American Adam, yet this myth is so strong that those who do not surrender to it become ghosts, lost to the world as it is now.

In the following I reconsider the images of the naturalized house in the two novels. Reflecting on the dual identities of the characters these houses are associated with, we must see some differences in the seemingly similar images. Ama’s duality comes from her being a crossblood, which itself is a metaphor from physical reality, indicating the character’s belonging to two worlds. Ama’s balanced relation to nature and civilization extends the understanding of her house as also a metaphor for man’s possibility to live in harmony with nature again. Sylvie’s duality, encapsulated in the metaphor of the mermaid is, in contrast, a metaphor from beyond empirical reality. As a result, the dissolving house becomes the metaphor for the impossibility of man’s living in harmony with nature again—unless man is dissolved in nature, two.

Ruth’s dissolution in nature at the end of the novel is the ambiguity that captures the interest of most critics: whether Ruth’s final border crossing is to be taken literally, as death, or “only” metaphorically. This is indeed an interesting question, yet irrelevant when we consider the effect of that crossing. What I find relevant in connection with the ending of *Housekeeping* is actually a paradox that comes from that border crossing. Ruth’s choice leaves her without a community, she is a ghost(-like) character, whose voice is not heard in the world. Nevertheless, she is speaking to us, and we do hear her. Are we, readers, then, part of the world she renounced, or have we become integrated into her world? Are we not like the people from *Fingerbone* who live according to the norms of the dominant culture? Yet, are we not able to hear Ruth’s voice as opposed to the world she has left?

The rebellious lifestyle practiced by Sylvie and Ruth is not tolerated in any ways by *Fingerbone*’s community. The “renegades” are forced to leave *Fingerbone*, and thus everything that it stands for: the world of stability, fixed norms and traditions. They fall victim to this world. However, reading Ruth’s narration it becomes clear that she and Sylvie are about to win a new world, the value of which is extremely relative, though: it is death for those who consider it from this world, and it is assuming a new form for those who, like Ruth, are speaking from that world beyond experiential reality. How the two worlds are related to each other is paradoxical: Ruth’s fate ques-

tions the effectiveness or use of Robinson's efforts to renew the literary tradition she distances herself from; the existence of the very text, in contrast, can be taken as proof for the possibility of regenerating this tradition.

As we have seen, the two female writers aim at renewing the American literary heritage through deconstructing it, by a shift in focus: Robinson is more concerned with the destruction part (after which there is the hope of regeneration), while Hogan focuses on the renewal, or restoration, as she prefers. Denying the white male literary tradition for Hogan is to rewrite—in a way, overwrite—that very tradition and thus create an alternative one by producing ethnic-feminist literature. The denial is, then, a positive choice because it is combined with the gesture of acceptance. It allows Hogan to house tradition, whereas the main activity in *Housekeeping* is unhousing, a term which may apply to tradition, too. For Robinson, the denial of the same white male literary tradition is a search for an alternative that has not taken shape yet. There is no real community for either herself or her protagonists to join. Acceptance here is acceptance of finding nothing but liquidity capable of assuming new forms. Her readers are invited to enter a new world, which can be seen only after having gained a new perception. We are invited to assume new forms. But do we dare to leave this world?

NOTES

¹ As far as influences from the American literary heritage are concerned, we can find a curious similarity between the two novels: one of the subverted motifs of *Power* comes from Melville's *Moby Dick* (Janie Soto's blooming wooden leg is a "resurrected" image of Ahab's wooden leg). *Moby-Dick* is the book which Marilynne Robinson most admires, and whose guiding influence on *Housekeeping* is openly acknowledged by its author (Schaub).

² This is so in *Housekeeping*, too, even if at first sight the novel appears to present a very special community, dominated by women, and featuring men as marginal, intruding characters. A closer investigation shows that the power is exercised by the men. The two men who appear in the story—the school principal and the sheriff—are public figures, as Thomas Foster points out, and they try to enforce the society's value system on Sylvie and her family. In contrast, we see "[t]he specification of death as the point when [Ruth's grandmother] would gain the power to exert her will within the public realm (Foster 76-77). "[T]he father-house does not require the actual presence of a father figure; women can maintain their places within patriarchal systems even in his absence," Geyh argues (108).

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