

THE FALL OF THE AMERICAN ADAM AND EVE:
DEMYTHOLOGISING FEMALE GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS IN
JEFFREY EUGENIDES' *THE VIRGIN SUICIDES* AND MARILYNNE
ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING*

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Introduction

In his 1955 book *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*, a foundational book in the field of American Studies, R. W. B. Lewis identified the “American Adam” as a mythical figure, representing American masculinity, that he believed was central to nineteenth-century American fiction. Lewis was working within what Bruce Kuklick called in 1972 the “myth-symbol school” of American literary criticism, a group of scholars in the 1950s and 60s who argued that “classical” works in American literature enabled one to identify certain key characteristics of the American “character,” or an American “myth,” that symbolized the essence of American identity and culture. The concept of a “canon” of American literature began with F. O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941), in which Matthiessen argued that a group of writers in mid-nineteenth century America could be linked through their belief in democracy. Following Matthiessen, other scholars began working in the field of myth criticism, including Henry Nash Smith, who suggested in his 1950 study *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* that American identity was based on a mythic conception of the American West. Five years after Nash, R. W. B. Lewis, citing Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* as an important influence, published *The American Adam*.

In the later decades of the twentieth century, a cohort of scholars working within feminist criticism, including Annette Kolodny and Susan J. Rosowski, took a revisionary approach to Lewis’ theory of the American Adam, arguing that certain female characters in literature can be described as “American Eves,” female counterparts to Lewis’ Adamic figure. Annette Kolodny links this figure – the

American Eve – with images in female-authored literature of “the home and the small cultivated garden of [woman’s] own making” (*Land Before Her* 6). Elaine Showalter considers the figure as a gender-reverse of the American Adam, arguing that the American Eve is a figure who “reject[s] the conventions of domesticity,” just as the American Adam “entered nature and refused to be domesticated” (*A Jury of Her Peers* 474). Kim Long argues that the best method to combat the masculine-defined American myth of innocence is to fully write women into Lewis’ paradigm: “only by adopting a new myth or by incorporating the feminine into the myth can wholeness and resolution be achieved” (205).

These interpretations, while appearing to offer an original female Adam, are fundamentally problematic, and the problems stems from myth criticism itself. By the end of the twentieth century, the methodological approach of the “myth-symbol school” came under fire of critics who argued that the construction of “myths of America” only reinforces a literary nationalism and the notion of American exceptionalism. In her influential essay on American literary criticism, “Melodramas of Beset Manhood” (1981), Nina Baym argued that “American literary criticism and theory has retained a nationalist orientation to this day,” criticising the tendency among (male) scholars to judge works against a fictional standard of what is most “American” (126). Similarly, Russell J. Reising criticises the type of prescriptive scholarship that Lewis engages in, saying, “[g]iven the range of American writings that theorists force into a single container, devalue, or exclude altogether, one feels that they flatten American literature more than they elucidate its essence” (226). Hence, by identifying an “American Eve,” critics participate in a tradition of myth criticism that is problematic because it propagates an ideological, and fictional, literary construction.

Hence, a fundamental aim of this thesis will be to contextualise and critique Lewis' construction of the American Adam, and critically examine how scholars such as Annette Kolodny have revised the myth by constructing an alternative American myth of femininity with the American Eve figure. My research will also take into account the most recent book-length study of the American Adam, Jonathan Mitchell's *Revisions of the American Adam: Innocence, Identity and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century America* (2011). Though Mitchell revitalizes the myth in light of modern approaches to literary criticism, such as poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories, and critiques Lewis for the creation of an ideological construction, his work in effect continues to propagate the myth of the American Adam. Considering the history of American myth scholarship, especially works influenced by the Adamic myth created by Lewis, as well as by looking at feminist theory, I will investigate in what ways the identification of an American Eve figure in literature is as similarly problematic as the American Adam.

After critiquing the myth of the American Adam as well as more recent scholarship on the American Eve, I will examine two twentieth-century novels that focus primarily on female characters: Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980). Indeed, considering the fact that "innocence and newness are cardinal concepts of the American myth," novels depicting childhood are highly significant because of the ways in which the young characters have been seen to embody these mythical American characteristics (Patea 18). However, in Robinson and Eugenides' novels of female development, the female protagonists reject the notion of an American myth, and deconstruct the paradigm of the American Adam and Eve. Instead, in their characterisation of women, Eugenides and Robinson present this type of mythical feminine identity as fundamentally

problematic or unnecessary. In Eugenides' novel, the group of male narrators frequently mythologise the Lisbon sisters with their fantastical descriptions of the girls as angelic and ideal feminine figures. Critics have also connected this characterisation of the sisters with the myth of American innocence, arguing that "the Lisbon sisters embody the pervading innocence that characterised the American nation from its origins" (Baldellou 134). However, I argue that a secondary narrative can be identified within the novel that emphasises the girls' own autonomy, and rejects such mythical identities. Consequently, the novel's ending can be read as a fundamental rejection of mythical identities, with the girls choosing to take their own lives in order to escape the boys' mythical characterisations. I will also briefly analyse Sofia Coppola's 1998 screen adaptation of Eugenides' novel, and evaluate how the Lisbon girls are presented as mythological constructs in her cinematic vision.

Describing the characters Ruth and Sylvie in *Housekeeping* as prototypical "American Eves", Maureen Ryan argues that Robinson "writes beyond the ending of the archetypal story of the American Adam" (82). However, I argue that the novel offers a more fluid representation of femininity, with Ruth and Sylvie actually deconstructing boundaries of identity within the novel, and existing at times within an unstable and undefined identity space. Thus, the female characters in both *Housekeeping* and *The Virgin Suicides* complicate the notion of a rigidly defined mythic female figure, as both Robinson and Eugenides offer complex female characters that refuse to be easily defined or characterised. Considering Jonathan Mitchell's critique of the American Adam as an ideological construction, this paper will demonstrate the complications in identifying female characters as similar constructions, and offer a reading of *Housekeeping* and *The Virgin Suicides* that critiques the creation of American myths of femininity.

Chapter 1: The Adamic Myth in Scholarship

In an article published just four years after R. W. B. Lewis' *The American Adam*, Frederic Carpenter argued that though "ambiguous," the story of the American Adam had become "the distinctively American myth" (602, 601). In the decades following the publication of Lewis' classic text, many scholars seized upon the myth of the American Adam to explain various works of American literature, especially those of the nineteenth century. The myth, as Carpenter summarises it, denotes an "innocent Adam living upon virgin land before a fall occasioned by the experience of modern evil" (600). In Lewis' own words, the American Adam "is willing ... to take on as much of the world as is available to him, without ever fully submitting to any of the world's determining categories" (198). However, Lewis does construct a category for this mythic figure, declaring him to be "an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling," and one who is "emancipated from history" (5). While Lewis deems the figure of the American Adam wholly original, unwilling to submit to categories, Lewis' own argument inevitably defines the figure in constricting terms.

Consequently, if the American Eve is defined against Lewis' American Adam, as early feminist critics have been wont to do, she becomes a similarly constricting and problematic figure. In order to demonstrate this, it is first necessary to examine Lewis' *The American Adam*, to both contextualise the myth and critically explore the problems with Lewis' mythical figure. I will also examine the most recent book-length study of the myth of the American Adam, Jonathan Mitchell's 2011 *Revisions of the American Adam*. Mitchell successfully revises Lewis' mythical figure in light of modern approaches to literary theory, but his work suffers from similar faults as *The American Adam*. Following the examination of the American Adam, I will look

to feminist revisions of Lewis' myth, examining how the construction of the American Eve is similarly problematic in the way that it is defined through and within Lewis' paradigm. Scholars have repeatedly made clear that within Lewis' myth, "women play negative roles as projections of male fantasies, as symbols of what Adam must leave behind or banish from his virgin land" (Person 668); however, in defining female characters within the myth of an American Eve, scholars have reduced these characters to a place that is comparably inferior, as they are defined within a masculinist interpretative framework. To demonstrate the complications of the American Eve figure fully, I will turn to later gender theorists, Judith Butler in particular. In this way, I will demonstrate that to define the American Eve as feminist literary critics have done in the past is to place this female figure within a history of problematic male literary criticism, and thus she is not such a revisionist character as feminist critics have supposed.

R. W. B. Lewis and the American Adam

On publication of *The American Adam* in 1955, contemporary scholars were quick to praise R. W. B. Lewis' work. Fellow scholar Henry Nash Smith, whose own book *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (1950) was a foundational work of myth criticism, argued that *The American Adam* was "exciting and indispensable," though other scholars noted certain flaws in Lewis' study (392). For example, Roy Harvey Pearce claimed that the work could not be called original, as "behind it [lay] the work of Henry Nash Smith, Perry Miller, Lionel Trilling, Newton Arvin, Kenneth Burke, and many, many others" (104). Indeed, it is perhaps valuable to consider Lewis' study as part of a larger body of early American Studies scholarship, especially when critically analysing the work. Lewis draws from earlier

scholars, especially Smith and Matthiessen, who initiated the kind of critical, symbolic approach to American literature that Lewis employs in *The American Adam*; hence, when one criticises Lewis' book, one must also criticise a larger, and connected, body of American literary and historical criticism. However, it is crucial to understand the Adamic figure as first described by Lewis in order to understand its relation to the American Eve, and thus I will summarily describe Lewis' primary arguments in the work.

Lewis' fundamental argument in *The American Adam* is that a cultural dialogue is apparent in American literature and other cultural works from the nineteenth century, and that the focus of this dialogue is "the noble but illusory myth of the American Adam" (89). Lewis identifies three main "parties" in the nineteenth century, each with a different ideological base for their reinforcement of the Adamic myth: the parties of Hope, Memory, and Irony. These three parties were each concerned with constructing a similar, but distinct, part of what Lewis calls "the emergent American myth" of the American Adam (4). In this way, Lewis is also a proponent of the myth and symbol methodology devised by Henry Nash Smith in *Virgin Land*. However, while Smith takes the West as the basis for his ideological construction, Lewis largely examines works of literature from canonical authors from the nineteenth century: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Henry James. Indeed, these are the same authors whose works F. O. Matthiessen argued in *American Renaissance* were most "American".

Though Lewis aims to "disentangle from the writings and pronouncements of the day the emergent American myth and the dialogue in which it was formed," it becomes clear that Lewis' American Adam is not strictly one figure, but multiple (4).

In fact, Lewis argues that the representation of the American Adam significantly changed throughout the nineteenth century. Lewis begins by describing the Adamic figure of the party of Hope, best encapsulated by Walt Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, a collection of poems that explored a "liberated, innocent, solitary, forward-thrusting personality" (28). This Adam represented pure innocence, as well as the symbolic birth of a distinct American personality in the nineteenth century, and thus, is the Adamic figure most modelled upon the Biblical Adam – that is, he represents the "primitive Adamic condition" of the first man, and Lewis praises Whitman for his pure representation of "the natural unfallen man" (42, 43). Similarly, the heroes of James Fenimore Cooper's fiction represent this type of Adamic figure – the "self-reliant young man who does seem to have sprung from nowhere" (91). As Lewis suggests, Cooper's heroes, especially Natty Bumppo of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, occupy a narrative space free of society and institutions, a world that is "fresh, free, and uncluttered" (103). Indeed, the character of Natty Bumppo in *The Deerslayer* – who Lewis deems to be the "full-fledged fictional Adam" – is reborn in a symbolic moment in chapter seven as the titular Deerslayer, an act "accomplished appropriately in the forest on the edge of a lake, with no parents near at hand ... springing from nowhere" (104, 105). Hence, the first American Adam is a symbolically original and innocent figure who finds himself reborn in America as a hero of the New World.

For Lewis, though, this hopeful and innocent Adam is not the best encapsulation of an "authentic American narrative," and he identifies a new strain of the Adamic hero in the fiction of Hawthorne and Melville (111). The first Adam, Lewis says, was limited by his lack of knowledge; through the Fall comes experience, and it is this fallen Adam who is the true American hero. In Hawthorne's fiction in particular, Lewis identifies a choice that must be made by the protagonist, notably

absent from the work of Cooper and other “hopeful” authors: “whether to accept the world he had fallen into, or whether to flee it, taking his chances in the allegedly free wilderness to the west” (113). The moral complexity he identifies in these new Adamic narratives leads Lewis to construct a new definition of the Adamic hero in American literature. The quintessential Adamic narrative thus becomes a story about “the ritualistic trials of the young innocent, liberated from family and social history or bereft of them” (127-8). This tragic hero is thus fundamentally different from the protagonist of Cooper’s *Deerslayer*, as he does not remain innocent but is changed through experience. Characters that according to Lewis illustrate this new strain of the Adamic hero include the eponymous hero of Melville’s *Billy Budd*, Donatello in Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun*, and Adam Verver in Henry James’ *The Golden Bowl*. It is the narrative of before, during, and after the Fall that becomes the defining American narrative for Lewis, wherein “the newborn or self-breeding or orphaned hero is plunged again and again, for his own good and ours, into the spurious, disruptive rituals of the actual world” (197-8).

The problem with this kind of myth scholarship, as many critics began to point out in the 1970s, is that it helps create a kind of “literary nationalism,” which implies that the country in question, the United States, has a unique type of literature or national character found nowhere else in the world (Tate 116). As Cecil F. Tate contends, *The American Adam* “does not account for the continuity of myths across many cultures of human history” (117). This is especially true of the myth that Lewis chooses to utilise – that of Adam and Eve, the Christian myth of origins, which is not in any way an exclusively or uniquely American myth. Fundamentally, the Adamic myth is an ideological construction – a paradigm that has been created by critics like Lewis and then imposed upon nineteenth-century literature. This problem is also

present in Jonathan Mitchell's recent *Revisions of the American Adam* (2011). In his reconsideration of the Adamic myth, Mitchell explores its place as an ideological construction in twentieth-century America; however, he fails to truly deconstruct Lewis' paradigm.

In *Revisions of the American Adam*, Mitchell places the concept of the American Adam within the bounds of twentieth-century American popular culture. Mitchell's major claim in the book is that the U.S. in the 1950s "was well on its way to achieving its ideal conception of itself" (2); in other words, during the early twentieth century, the U.S. "had triumphed in its will to become a utopian nation," and, consequently, "no longer needed to yearn for a state it believed, and moreover, acted as if it had already attained" (2). Hence, as Mitchell goes on to argue, the paradigm of the American Adam became "a fundamental organising narrative of American identity in the twentieth century," appearing in political speeches, advertising, and films from the era (1). In contrast to Lewis, Mitchell makes the essentialist nature of the Adamic figure clear at the beginning of his book, redefining the American Adam as "the white, male, heterosexual, protestant American," a point that is certainly implied in Lewis' male-orientated vision of American literature but never explicitly stated (2). Mitchell also focuses, more than Lewis, on the frontier, arguing that this structure also shaped the idea of an American identity, and thus is "inextricably linked with the American Adam" (2). However, despite this radical revision of Lewis' ideological construction, *Revisions of the American Adam* suffers from similar flaws as Lewis' original study, and Mitchell declines to reflect upon the place of his study in a larger scholarly debate surrounding American myth criticism.

Mitchell's work is much more self-reflexive than that of Lewis, which can be plainly recognised when Mitchell states in chapter one: "this book does not seek to

deny the validity of the American Adam (indeed the very book is about this figure), but to evoke it in its materiality; to analyse it in order to explore the ‘reality’ of this virtual edifice” (5). Mitchell’s primary argument is that the American Adam constitutes an “ideology of masculinity” that “shapes and holds American identity to a specific design” in the twentieth century (7, 3). In *The American Adam*, Lewis consistently attempts to prove that the American Adam does indeed exist as a character in nineteenth-century literature; in comparison, Mitchell understands the American Adam myth as a construction, and responds by not seeking to actively validate its existence, as Lewis does, but to demonstrate the flaws in the figure. Hence, in a radical revision of Lewis’ paradigm, Mitchell considers the American Adam to be a “paradigm of promise that masks the means of ideological control” in the way that it promotes an essentialist vision of a specifically masculine American identity (4).

Additionally, Mitchell recognizes that critics themselves actively contribute to the creation of myth, arguing that scholars such as Lewis “sharpened the ideological edge of this mythologization of history” (3). Nevertheless, it is difficult to discern if Mitchell’s work does something significantly different or whether, like Lewis, he only reproduces a mythic view of American culture. At first, Mitchell’s work appears to fall into the same category of scholarship as that of the feminist and revisionist critics in the 1970s who set out to expose the flaws in the mythical approach to American history and literature, yet Mitchell fails to place his work explicitly within this larger scholarly debate, limiting himself to criticism of *The American Adam*. Including this kind of context would have added a layer of critical depth to the work, and exposed the ways in which other scholars have perpetuated a mythical view of American culture. Therefore, despite labelling itself as a “revision” of the Adamic myth,

Mitchell's work fails to fundamentally subvert Lewis' paradigm, and though it benefits from an awareness of how critics can be creators of myth, Mitchell fails to apply this understanding to his own study.

Ultimately, the problem with myth criticism is that it upholds a belief in the uniqueness of American cultural experience, and insists upon a special destiny for the United States and for characters within American literature. Most importantly, this scholarship implies a special destiny for *male* characters, and frequently excludes female characters from this myth. However, Lewis admits in *The American Adam* that Eve is fundamental to the Adamic myth, quoting the elder Henry James, who wrote: "the first and highest service which Eve renders Adam is to throw him out of Paradise" (58). Without Eve, Adam would not have undergone the "educative experience" of falling and, consequently, would not have become the true American hero, the American Adam (73). Though Lewis offers some female characters from American literature as possible examples of the American Adam, such as Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer, he declines to go into detail, leaving them as intruders in his predominantly masculine narrative (128). Similarly, despite his intention to revise the Adamic myth and expose its flaws, Mitchell also declines to investigate the role of women within this paradigm. Mitchell does acknowledge the subordinate place of women within Lewis' Adamic myth in the first chapter: "Without having to state it, the American Adam is a masculine privileging paradigm; to evoke the American Adam is to designate woman as Eve: secondary to man and subjected to his rule" (5). However, despite this proclamation, he goes no further in questioning the masculine foundation of the myth. Instead, he chooses to focus entirely on masculine American identity, perpetuating the marginalization of women within American literature and film. Hence, Lewis and Mitchell exclude women in their definition of

“Americanness,” despite claiming that the Adamic myth is a national myth. Leland Person Jr. signals this exclusion as a major weakness in Lewis’ Adamic myth, arguing that the identification of an American Adam in literature “obscures the often heroic roles women have played on the frontier, it oversimplifies women’s roles in many novels, and, most important, it ignores the possibilities of a female-centred frontier myth” (669-70).

Annette Kolodny and the American Eve

In response to this subordination of women in the Adamic myth, feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, most prominently Annette Kolodny, endeavoured to place women within Lewis’ paradigm, and explored the idea of a “female-centred frontier myth”. In Kolodny’s 1984 book *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*, Kolodny argues that female authors from this period wrote themselves into an American myth of the West. The mythical construction of the West is crucial to the Adamic myth, as it is this scene that becomes the “wilderness” that the American Adam frequently flees to. Unsurprisingly, the main target of Kolodny’s feminist critique in her revision of the myth is Henry Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, which, as mentioned earlier, laid the foundation for the myth-symbol school of American Studies. Kolodny’s exploration of a female-centred frontier myth results in the creation of the “American Eve,” a female counterpart to Lewis’ male hero. However, though she constructs this figure in order to highlight the autonomy of women within the myth, the paradigm still confines female characters, and is as problematic as Lewis’ masculinist construction.

In an earlier book, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975), Kolodny expanded upon the myth of the “virgin

land” identified by Henry Nash Smith, and argued that “America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy” is “an experience of the land as essentially feminine” (4). In *Virgin Land*, Smith primarily responded to Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis, arguing that Turner’s hypothesis – that westward movement across the North American continent had shaped the American character – “could hardly have attained such universal acceptance if it had not found an echo in ideas and attitudes already current” (4). Smith’s study explored Turner’s idea of the West as “the vacant continent beyond the frontier,” primarily in literature from the nineteenth century (Smith 4). In *The Lay of the Land*, Kolodny went further than Smith, arguing that the idea of the “virgin land” of the frontier represented a masculine constructed myth that projected a feminine image onto the American West, a fantasy that saw the environment as an area of “receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction” (4). By examining authors and historians from the sixteenth century onwards, including Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and James Fenimore Cooper, Kolodny argued that this male fantasy “allowed a landscape of the mind to be projected upon and perceived as an objective and external ‘real-world’ landscape” (156). In this way, Kolodny critiqued Smith’s interpretation of Western history, exposing its flaws as a predominantly masculinist and mythological argument.

As one reviewer noted, in *The Lay of the Land* Kolodny failed to examine “the environmental attitudes of those Americans [she] chose deliberately to exclude from scrutiny: women themselves” (Lowenthal 248). In order to focus more fully on the place of women within the Western literary tradition, Kolodny’s second work responded to the implicit rejection of women in frontier myths. Consequently, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (1984) was an attempt to include women’s experiences in the myth of the American

frontier, and demonstrate that their fantasies contributed as much to the production of an American myth as did male fantasies. However, though Kolodny evidently aimed to give autonomy and agency to the female writers she analysed, by inventing the term “the American Eve” to describe how these writers “claimed the frontiers as a potential sanctuary for an idealized domesticity,” Kolodny continues to work within the paradigm of the masculinist myth created by Lewis (xiii).

In *The Land Before Her*, Kolodny argues for a “New American Eve,” who attempted to write herself into the masculine narrative of the American West, starting with Mary Rowlandson’s 1682 Indian captivity narrative. Thus, as one reviewer put it, *The Land Before Her* “presents the first critically sophisticated analysis of the network of images associated with this newly recognized American Eve” (Brady 376). Kolodny argues that as men were exploiting Western land, acting out their own erotic fantasies of the landscape constructed as feminine – an argument explored in *The Lay of the Land* – “women set about making their own mark on the landscape, reserving to themselves the language of gardening” (6-7). In carving out their own female spaces in the landscape, women enacted their own female myth, repossessing the land and civilizing the American Adam, “fetching him out of the forest and into the town,” a radical revision of the myth of the Western frontiersman who is traditionally represented as unhampered by civilization (9). Kolodny does not resort to the traditional biblical model to define her American Eve; in contrast, her Eves are female Adams, characters who used vehicles such as the captivity narrative to “confront the often unhappy experiences of their westward migration” (34). Hence, in the action of “claim[ing] new terrain as their own,” which was accomplished through domestic enterprises, women occupy the same paradigm as the American Adam, only in a female form (6). Thus, Kolodny’s identification of the myth of the “New World

Eve” depends upon the existence of the “American Adam” as well as the myth of the frontier wilderness defined by Smith in *Virgin Land* – both male-privileging ideological paradigms.

Not all critics have interpreted this methodology as problematic, though. For example, reviewer Melody Graulich argued:

Kolodny approaches her subject with the dual perspective which is one of the strengths of feminist theory today: while she acknowledges that the dominating male ideologies have restricted women’s lives and outlooks, she does not present women as victims but asserts that they have been free to envision new realities and possibilities. (357)

However, if, as I have suggested, the creation of the American Adam and the perpetuation of frontier myths upholds damaging notions of literary nationalism and the pervading myth of the American as male, the “New World Eve,” because of its existence in relation to the American Adam, functions in the same way. The American Eve does not necessarily convey an idea of “new realities and possibilities,” but instead confines female characters in literature to problematic ideological constructions. Hence, like the American Adam, the American Eve also upholds ideals of exceptionalist femininity in the United States, as well as propagating the idea that mythical constructions are grounded in societal reality.

Not only Annette Kolodny, but also other scholars from the 1970s onwards have propagated the idea of an “American Eve”. In a 1985 article discussing miscegenation in female-authored frontier fiction, Leland Person Jr. argued that marriage between women and Native Americans in these novels depicted “an Eden from which Adam rather than Eve has been excluded” (670). More recently than this though, scholars have endeavored to examine the American Eve as an equally important literary construct as Lewis’ American Adam. Two examples of extensive late-twentieth-century scholarship on the American Eve are Kim Long’s “The

American Eve: Gender, Tragedy, and the American Dream” (1993) and Karen Waldron’s “Coming to Consciousness, Coming to Voice: The Reinvention of Eve in American Women’s Writings” (1994), both unpublished Ph.D. dissertations.

Kim Long begins her dissertation by demonstrating the masculine foundations of the Adamic myth, describing how “America has adopted the Eden myth as its own,” and explicitly stating that “the New Garden of America ... has been a masculine garden because of its dependence on the myth of the Fall” (3). After first demonstrating the tradition amongst American scholars such as Lewis, Smith and others to discuss the Garden of Eden *without* Eve – itself an argument put forward by Leland Person Jr. and Annette Kolodny in the 1980s – Long argues that female authors have subsequently “resisted man’s categories and [have] thwarted his attempts to marginalize her” (13). Consequently, Long argues, this female resistance has led to the failure of the male-dominated myth of the American Dream. Hence, the American Eve, according to Long, is a female character that does not fit, or refuses to fit, into the categories defined by male novelists and scholars; female characters she describes as American Eves include Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*. Long’s argument recalls Lewis’ own descriptions of the American Adam in literature, namely, that this type of hero “is willing ... to take on as much of the world as is available to him, without ever fully submitting to any of the world’s determining categories” (198). Hence, Long’s American Eve appears to fit into the very same mold as that of the American Adam and consequently her mythical figure can be described as a simple gender-reversal of the American Adam, and thus not a particularly revisionary or radical construction. Long concludes her dissertation by arguing that “only by adopting a new myth or by incorporating the feminine into the

myth can wholeness and resolution be achieved” (205). However, this methodology only opens up more problems for feminist novelists and critics and would continue to describe female characters in masculinist terms, and more specifically within those of Lewis’ problematic Adamic myth.

While Long largely focuses on twentieth-century writers, Karen Waldron’s dissertation on the American Eve examines nineteenth-century literature, specifically *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), *Ruth Hall* (1854), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and *The Awakening* (1899), focusing on representations of femininity in sentimental fiction. Like Long, Waldron rejects the “masculine mythos” which she argues has permeated examples of American literary individualism, and instead chooses to highlight instances of women’s self-consciousness in her selected novels, primarily as a reaction against the “modernist ‘Adamic’ canon” (30). Ultimately, Waldron’s research suggests that women’s fiction, including the domestic fiction she focuses on, should be read as intentionally trying to “reinvent Eve”. However, like Long, by resorting to the descriptor “American Eve” in her analysis of female consciousness she inevitably relies upon an archetype, instead of interrogating it. Female characters in Waldron’s view, in spite of their reinvention as the American Eve, are once again simply reincarnations of the same mythical construction first coined by male American scholars in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, though Waldron aims to identify a subversive, and autonomous, female consciousness, by relying on myths such as that of the American Adam and American Eve, she fails to dismantle the male myth.

As I have demonstrated, there are many complications arising from the identification of an American Eve in American fiction, not only in the ways that this descriptor reproduces the same exceptionalist discourse as the masculine version of

the Adamic myth, but also in the ways that it describes supposedly “radical” female characters within a masculine paradigm. It is necessary to reflect critically on the problems with a mythic construction of femininity with reference to prominent feminist theorists, and ultimately offer a possible remedy to this reductive identity for female characters in American literature.

The Fall of the American Eve: An Alternative to Binary Mythic Constructions

So far I have aimed to deconstruct the Adamic myth, pointing out its flaws in both R. W. B. Lewis and Jonathan Mitchell’s versions of the masculine paradigm, as well as to briefly introduce the problems within recent female scholarship on the American Eve. To further expose the American Eve as a problematic paradigm, feminist theory is crucial. In her influential and still relevant book *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978), Judith Fetterley describes feminist criticism as a “constantly transforming phenomenon characterized by a resistance to codification and a refusal to be rigidly defined or to have its parameters prematurely set” (viii). In this way, feminist criticism is an appropriate vehicle through which to question the parameters defined by the Adamic myth. By considering feminist theory, I aim to identify more complex representations of women in twentieth-century American novels, whose characterizations represent a rejection of the binaries imposed by mythic figures such as the American Adam and American Eve. Indeed, the purpose of my readings of *The Virgin Suicides* and *Housekeeping* will be in part, to borrow Fetterley’s words, “to expose and question that complex of ideas and mythologies about women and men which exist in our society and are confirmed in our literature” (xx).

Women have traditionally been defined by reductive and mythical terms within literature and culture; indeed, Alicia Ostriker argues that “it is thanks to myth that we believe that women must be either ‘angel’ or ‘monster’” (316). Similarly, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue in their early feminist study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1980) that “a woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17). A similar action is necessary in order to transcend more recent constructions of the American Eve, which have developed, as I have demonstrated, from a masculine-centered myth defined by male literary critics. The problematic nature of the American Eve figure becomes clearer when considering Judith Butler’s argument for a new language to accurately represent female identity. To quote Butler:

For feminist theory, the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women has seemed necessary to foster the political visibility of women. This has seemed obviously important considering her pervasive cultural condition in which women’s lives were either misrepresented or not represented at all. (*Gender Trouble* 4)

To define women in terms of an Adamic myth, then, is inevitably to define them through a language that has traditionally excluded women, and though critics such as Annette Kolodny have attempted to show how women have tried to repossess paradise through writing fiction, the language of the Adamic myth remains male-centered and male-defined. Thus, though critics have attempted to employ the figure of the American Eve to rescue female characters from a masculine myth, the new figure remains as confined as she was before her naming. Indeed, Judith Butler argues, “Within a language pervasively masculine, a phallogocentric language, women constitute the *unrepresentable*” (*Gender Trouble* 14, author’s emphasis). Hence, within the language of the American Adam, which the American Eve is

fundamentally part of, women are actually an absence, and defining such a mythical identity remains restricting, resigning women to anonymity within a masculine-constructed paradigm.

It is also necessary to examine generic conventions of the traditional bildungsroman, the genre to which both *The Virgin Suicides* and *Housekeeping* belong. Elizabeth Abel defines the bildungsroman as a “vision of individual development” that consists of “a series of disillusionments or clashes ... These clashes culminate not in integration but in withdrawal, rebellion, or even suicide” (6). Interestingly, Lewis also considers the Adamic myth as a sort of bildungsroman, defining the American Adam as a figure who must undergo “the necessary transforming shocks and sufferings, the experiments and errors ... through which maturity and identity may be arrived at” (61). However, Elizabeth Abel also argues that “female fictions of development reflect the tensions between the assumptions of a genre that embodies male norms and the values of its female protagonists” (11). Hence, female growth narratives can also serve to dismantle to the binaries evoked by labels such as the American Adam and American Eve, and offer a space for characters whose identities are more fluid, and who reject the sort of mythical and essentialist representation of femininity that is implied in the figure of the American Eve.

Thus, I will argue that in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Housekeeping*, the female characters – the Lisbon sisters and Ruth and Sylvie, respectively – offer a remedy to the restrictive qualities of the American Eve by demonstrating a more flexible or fluid femininity that rejects mythical and conventional social constructions of identity. Expanding upon Simone de Beauvoir’s feminist theories, Judith Butler argues that when discussing female identity, “what we can call essence of a material fact is simply an enforced cultural option which has disguised itself as natural truth”

("Variations" 37). This is the core of the representation of femininity in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Housekeeping*: that female identity, and especially the figure of the American Eve, is a social construct. Thus, these novels fundamentally reject mythical moulds and expose (female) identity as fundamentally unstable and open to a wider array of interpretations.

Chapter 2: The Rejection of Mythic Femininity in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides*

Jeffrey Eugenides' debut novel *The Virgin Suicides* (1993) tells the story of five sisters living in a suburb of Grosse Point, Michigan. The story is narrated by an anonymous group of boys from the same suburb, who observe the sisters after the suicide of the youngest, Cecilia, and subsequently try to make sense of the other sisters' suicides a year later. Though reviewers and critics have not yet used the term "American Eve" to describe the representation of the Lisbon sisters in the novel, reviewers have emphasized that the male narrators use mythic qualities to represent Therese, Mary, Bonnie, Lux, and Cecilia Lisbon. For example, in a *New York Times* review of the novel, Michiko Kakutani argues that, "the deaths of the five Lisbon sisters take on the high, cold shimmer of myth". Similarly, Sarah Munchow argues that the Lisbon sisters become, through the boys' narration, "statuesque ideas of girls" who are idolized by the boys (54). The figure of the virgin girl has historically "provided a powerful enticement for males in American literature" (Long 7); however, Eugenides provides an original view of this archetypal feminine figure by revealing, within a submerged secondary narrative, the Lisbon sisters' desire to escape the confines of these mythic versions of American female identity.

In my reading of *The Virgin Suicides*, I identify a main story, narrated by the neighbourhood boys, which strengthens a mythical representation of the Lisbon sisters, and also a secondary narrative, running parallel to the male narration, which rejects such a mythical representation of femininity. Thus, I uphold Debra Shostak's reading of the novel as, ultimately, "anti-misogynistic" (822). Shostak argues:

The Virgin Suicides leaves the potential for altering standpoint to the reader who resists the norms conveyed by the monovocal narrators and who instead seeks to listen to the implied or embedded viewpoint of the sisters. Such a

reader must hear the girls' dialogue as reported by the boys, but against the grain of the boys' interpretations. (814)

Hence, the secondary narrative that I identify is the girls' own narrative, a story that embodies their desire to escape the confines of the boys' mythical representation of their femininity, even if they can only do so through their suicides at the end of the novel. Hence, the two plot strands also conform to the pattern Elizabeth Abel sees as characteristic of the female bildungsroman: "the tensions that shape female development" in the coming-of-age novel "may lead to a disjunction between a surface plot, which affirms social conventions, and a submerged plot, which encodes rebellion" (12). I will argue that the Lisbon sisters' rebellion constitutes a rejection of a mythical coding of American femininity, and also of the constraints of this type of mythical reading. Though it is possible to argue, as Shostak does, that "the Lisbon girls are silenced by the social construction of their femininity," this is not to say that the girls do not try to escape the confines of this constructed femininity (814). Hence, I read their suicides at the end as an explicit rebellion, a way of taking control away from the male narrators and placing it in their own hands.

"The view of women as passive has been integral to the male novel of development," Mary Anne Ferguson argues (229). The male narrators in *The Virgin Suicides* also share this view of women, and it is possible to argue that the novel is not about the girls at all, but about the growth of the boys who narrate the story. By narrating the novel in this way, the boys introduce a level of control over the girls' representations, which is crucial to the process of mythologising the girls. Shostak exposes the link between the boys' personal narration and the mythologization of the sisters when she argues that to represent the girls as subjects, not objects, would be to "displace the narrators from the centre of their story" (826). Hence, to understand the mythologization of the sisters we must first deconstruct the boys' narrative control

over the sisters. Although the Lisbon sisters are the titular “virgins,” they are mysteriously absent from the boys’ narrative. Eugenides has offered this same reading on multiple occasions in interviews, saying that in his novel “[the girls] don’t really exist as an exact entity,” and also that he aimed “to tell the story through the consciousness of the town in which these girls had lived and died” (Myers; Schiff 104). Significantly, the boys begin their narrative at the end of the story, on the day the last sister, Mary, commits suicide. Thus, it is impossible to say that the girls are actually present in the narrative; because it is narrated decades after the events themselves and the story starts at the end of the girls’ lives, the supposed protagonists of the story are dead before the narrative even begins. Hence, as Shostak argues, the narrators’ project of commemorating the Lisbon sisters is instead “a project that causes them incidentally to construct a history of their own adolescent selves” (808). This is in spite of the fact that the boys repeatedly say that their aim in the narration is to “understand what [the girls] were feeling and who they were” (64).

In addition to the sisters’ absence from the male narration, the boys exercise control over the girls through “Exhibits” they have collected. For example, “Exhibit #1” is a photograph of the Lisbon house “taken shortly before Cecilia’s suicide attempt,” though other items range from old cosmetics, candles, a brassiere and a pair of high-tops, objects that were all once owned by the Lisbon girls (5). These objects total 97, and are “arranged in five separate suitcases, each bearing a photograph of the deceased like a Coptic headstone, and kept in our refurbished tree house” (246). The care taken over the archiving of the artefacts evidently illustrates the boys’ desire to categorise and contain the girls, and, significantly, to preserve them as their childhood selves, represented by the “refurbished tree house”. Significantly, at certain moments in the text these items are displayed to an anonymous audience, with the narrators

cautioning at one point: “Please don’t touch. We’re going to put the picture back in the envelope now” (119). Eugenides’ use of the direct address and the present tense in these moments makes clear that the narrators’ control over the Lisbon girls remains even after they have passed away, and, as Kenneth Millard argues, the exhibits themselves are evidence of “the boys’ desire to know and possess them” (80). Thus, Eugenides demonstrates that the narrators exert a controlling force over the girls, a desire to contain them and control their representations.

The use of the plural narrator and the presentation of the “Exhibits” ultimately contribute to the idealization of the sisters that is consistently achieved in the narrative. This type of representation is most obvious in the boys’ descriptions of the two youngest sisters, Cecilia and Lux, which exemplifies what Shostak identifies as “the male gaze turned on beautiful, doomed females” (809). After her first suicide attempt, Cecilia is found holding a laminated picture of the Virgin Mary, and the boys find this highly significant (4). The narrators subsequently emphasise Cecilia’s youth and innocence, picturing the scene not as something tragic, but beautiful. For example, the narrators describe Cecilia in this moment as being like a “tiny Cleopatra on an imperial litter,” and the scene of the paramedics, Cecilia, and Cecilia’s mother on the lawn is described as a “tableau” in which Cecilia is “the drugged virgin rising up on her elbows, with an otherworldly smile on her pale lips” (5, 6). Indeed, because the scene is captured in artistic language – also evident in the detail of the “overexposed grass” – the scene seems barely real, more like an imagined painting than anything from reality (6). Hence, Cecilia’s attempted suicide is represented as something aesthetically pleasing, and in this moment Cecilia becomes a female idol whose actions are not met with sympathy but are instead glorified.

Though Cecilia survives her first suicide attempt, the boys continue to represent her as a mythical woman long after this crucial first moment in the novel. For example, at the party the Lisbon parents hold after Cecilia's attempted suicide – a response to a psychiatrist's recommendation that the Lisbons "relax their rules" on the girls – Cecilia's representation by the boys is once again plagued by mythical descriptions (21). She is described as wearing, "as usual," a vintage wedding dress with "sequins on the bust she didn't fill out" (26). This image of a young girl in a wedding dress, portraying innocence and virginity, is contrasted with the boys' comment that Cecilia had "colored her lips with red crayon, which gave her face a deranged harlot look" (27). Shostak describes the problematic nature of these images by noting that Cecilia "appears to the boys solely in the guises of the feminine archetypes – the virgin, the whore" (821). Hence, the boys do not see Cecilia as a real girl, but fluctuate in their narration between problematic female stereotypes. Later the same night, when Cecilia successfully commits suicide by jumping from her bedroom window onto the garden fence, the boys' narration once again cannot separate the actuality of the event from its appearance as art. The boys describe Cecilia as being "balanced on the pole like a gymnast," and they add that her "fluttering wedding dress added to this circusy effect" (31). So, despite the boys' assertion that each of them "possessed his own vivid memories of Cecilia," their descriptions of her never seem to inhabit reality (40).

The narrators also describe Lux Lisbon in similarly mythical terms, especially within the narrative of her short relationship with Trip Fontaine, who, significantly, is also described as an idealized masculine figure. However, though Trip is at first mythologised along with Lux, the narrators' descriptions of him change in the portions of the novel set in the present moment, in which the narrators visit Trip in

rehab. In comparison, Lux remains a mythical character throughout the narrative, and the boys preserve her as a fantastical female figure through their narration. Trip enters the story as a proto-American Adam character, who emerges shortly before the suicides “to the delight of girls and women alike” (69). His transformation into male idol sees him reject the “schoolboy shirts of his youth” for “Western outfits, shirts with pearl buttons, decorative pocket flaps and shoulder stitching”; hence, the narrators view him as a stereotypical American frontier hero (70). His mythologization continues when the boys describe the reactions he amasses from female classmates, whose attentions transform Trip into a “pasha, accepting tribute at the court of his synthetic coverlet” (73). However, when the narration moves to the present day, Trip’s descriptions are significantly absent of myth. He becomes a “recovering substance abuser” with “sickly-looking wads of yellow skin under his eyes,” an obvious contrast to the idealised masculine descriptions the narrators gave him earlier (75). This is the last physical description we get of Trip in the novel, and though he appears later when the boys remember the Homecoming dance, the focus is firmly on the sisters. Hence, Trip’s mythologization is halted in the narrative, though this is not the case with Lux’s representation.

On seeing Lux for the first time, Trip describes the moment as timeless and otherworldly, and the boys reinterpret his descriptions by saying: “The rest of her face – the pulpy lips, the blond sideburn fuzz, the nose with its candy-pink translucent nostrils – registered dimly as the two blue eyes lifted him on sea wave and held him suspended” (78). Similarly, on their second encounter, Trip describes how “A fuzzy aura surrounded her, a shimmering of atoms breaking apart” (82). The boys’ lurid attention to detail in their description attests to their collective voyeurism, and Trip’s own description of the moment also serves to cement Lux as a fantastical figure.

Indeed, in these moments, Lux's individual features are irrelevant – both the narrators and Trip opt for an impersonal description of her, and thus “the girls serve a representative function to the boys rather than existing as subjects in themselves” (Shostak 810). Additionally, Trip's descriptions of his first sexual encounter with Lux are loaded with mythical metaphors. The narrators say that Trip spoke of the experience later “as one might a religious experience, a visitation or vision, any rupture into this life from beyond that cannot be described in words” (86). Trip is one of the only characters in the novel who gets close to the Lisbon girls, yet when he talks about it later, he cannot recount anything close to factual information about the experience. This is further ironic as the sexual encounter between Lux and Trip is actually one of the few moments when Lux is not confined, and is in control of her own actions – risking breaking her mother's bedtime curfew to see Trip again. When Trip first visits the Lisbon house to spend the evening with the family, the atmosphere is thoroughly sterile and confining. For example, Trip tells the boys that “A Walt Disney special was on, and the Lisbons watched it with the acceptance of a family accustomed to bland entertainment, laughing together at the same lame stunts, sitting up during the rigged climaxes” (84). More hints at the stifled atmosphere of the sisters' house are given when Trip notes that “Before the channel could be changed, [Mrs Lisbon] consulted the *TV Guide* to judge the program's suitability” (84). In the household, then, an air of control pervades, just as with the narrators' representation of the girls throughout the novel. When Lux later goes out to Trip's car to surprise him – an action which she undertakes in protest of this stifling atmosphere – Lux is, like Cecilia, described not as a real figure, but an amalgamation of feminine stereotypes. Trip says that she “came on like a starved animal” with the power of “two beasts,” and she had a “mythic mutability that allowed her to possess three or

four arms at once” (86, 87). Hence, from the beginning of Trip’s short relationship with Lux, she is not seen as a real person, but instead as a mythological figure, like Cecilia.

The male narrators continue this mythological representation of the girls with their descriptions of the Lisbon house. Indeed, these descriptions are crucial because they seem to place the Lisbon girls within a typical narrative of American myth, and indeed the type of myth propagated by the “myth-symbol school” of American Studies scholars in the mid-twentieth century. Significantly, to the boys, as well as to other inhabitants of the suburb, the Lisbon sisters are typically American. On their first collective visit to the Lisbon house for Cecilia’s party, the boys focus their attention on certain symbolic items: “The dining room was full of stark colonial furniture. One wall had a painting of the Pilgrims plucking a turkey” (25). Although these descriptions could be ignored as insignificant, the symbolic painting returns in the crucial, final scene of the novel when the boys enter the Lisbon house and witness the suicides of the girls. At this moment, “A car passed, sending a shadow sweeping across the dining room, momentarily lighting up the painting of the Pilgrims” (213). The painting is significant to the boys’ mythologization of the girls as it places the Lisbon family, and especially the sisters, within a larger American historical narrative. However, though the boys find the painting significant, mentioning it twice in their narrative, the subject of the painting is not one of an idealized American history, but a normal scene depicting everyday life. This misreading of the painting by the boys points to their own inability to also see the sisters in terms of reality, and not a mythical narrative. Regardless, the narrators continue their representation of the girls as mythical women when they describe their appearances before the Homecoming dance in chapter three, which the girls have, tentatively, been allowed

to attend. Mrs Lisbon makes the girls their own dresses for the dance, which, following Mrs Lisbon's rules about feminine appearance, appear as "four identical shapeless sacks," making the girls appear one and the same (118). In a photograph from the same night, catalogued as "Exhibit #10", the girls appear "lined up in their party dresses, shoulder to square shoulder, like pioneer women. Their stiff hairdos ... have the stoic, presumptuous quality of European fashions enduring the wilderness. The dresses too look frontierish, with lace-trimmed bibs and high necklines" (118). Once again, it is the boys' own imagination that interprets the dresses as "frontierish" and turns the girls into "pioneer women". Thus, the boys position the girls within a specific American myth, that of the pioneers of the American West who must "[endure] the wilderness". As we have seen, the frontier is an important place of origin for mythical forms of American identity, and the fact that the girls are placed within this mythical American narrative once again depicts them within an idealized, and constructed, identity. Hence, the girls' private space of their house and their individual personalities merge with a narrative of American myth, and this allows them little space to define their own individual personalities.

The girls' links to an American myth is also confirmed by the actions of their suburban neighbours who, like the boys, attempt to make sense of their suicides. After all five of the sisters have committed suicide, community members, newspaper reporters, and teachers from their school all attempt to find reasons for the girls' actions. For example, Mr Hedlie, the English teacher, "put the whole thing down to the misfortune of living in a dying empire," while other suggestions from concerned members of the community "had to do with the way the mail wasn't delivered on time, and how potholes never got fixed, or the thievery at City Hall, or the race riots, or the 801 fires set around the city on Devil's night" (231). The boys end this list of

collected opinions by concluding: “The Lisbon girls became a symbol of what was wrong in the country” (231). Hence, the girls are never real individuals within the narrative, but symbolic victims of America’s ills. Earlier, on the “Day of Grieving” organised at their high school to help the girls recover after Cecilia’s suicide, the teachers believe it would be inappropriate to “single out the girls’ tragedy” (104). Instead, they proclaim a day of general mourning, but as a result Cecilia’s suicide is “diffused and universalized,” and students felt like “[they] were supposed to feel sorry for everything that ever happened, ever” (104). Moreover, the news of Cecilia’s first suicide attempt is considered inappropriate for local newspapers, “because the editor, Mr. Baubee, felt such depressing information wouldn’t fit between the front-page article on the Junior League Flower Show and the back-page photographs of grinning brides” (15). Ironically, though, the paper does run a story on the cemetery workers strike, which includes morbid details such as “bodies piling up” (15). Later, after Cecilia’s death, a news report also declines to cover the specifics of Cecilia’s individual suicide, instead choosing to focus on “public awareness of a national crisis” (96). Informational pamphlets about suicide distributed around the school at the same time also “[make] no mention of Cecilia’s death, delving instead into the causes of suicide in general” (98). Thus, it seems that while the deaths of other Grosse Point inhabitants are acceptable for the national narrative, as demonstrated by the detailed story about the cemetery workers strike, the specific circumstances of Cecilia’s death are kept out of an objective media narrative. Crucially, though Cecilia and the other Lisbon girls’ suicides are described as being part of national problems, their specific identities are actually rejected in favour of a homogenous American narrative in which the girls are simply symbols for mythical components of American

national identity. Consequently, as Michiko Kakutani argues in her review of the novel, Cecilia's death "take[s] on the high, cold shimmer of myth."

To begin to understand the girls' actions in the novel as representing a rejection of this mythical type of identity, it is useful to return to Judith Butler's gender theory. Butler argues that "the development of a language that fully or adequately represents women" is fundamentally important in order for women to escape confinement within patriarchal boundaries (*Gender Trouble* 4). In traditional masculinist language in a patriarchal society, Butler insists, "women represent the sex that cannot be thought, a linguistic absence and opacity" (*Gender Trouble* 14). *The Virgin Suicides* would appear at first to confirm a misogynistic reading of the novel – the Lisbon girls rarely have their own voice in the novel, most often being talked about by other people, most obviously by the male narrators. Indeed, even when the girls have the opportunity to speak, their voices are interpreted as ambiguous or simply unreal. For example, in chapter four, contact is made between the narrators and the Lisbon girls after Mrs Lisbon has them confined to the house in "maximum-security isolation" (141). At first, the girls attempt to communicate with the boys using pictures of the Virgin Mary like the one found with Cecilia at the beginning of the novel, and, later, they flash Lux's Chinese lantern in an "indecipherable Morse code" (189). In a clear example of the girls' "linguistic absence" in the narrative, the boys find that this Morse code does not, in their eyes, "correspond to any established mode of communication" (190). At length, the boys decide to reach the girls directly using the Lisbon house phone. They describe the moment they first hear the voice of one of the girls, saying, "It sounded – perhaps because the speaker was whispering – irreparably altered, diminished, the voice of a child fallen down a well" (194). Hence, even when the girls do get a chance to speak their own language, to the boys it seems

distant and unclear. Afterwards, the boys communicate with the girls by playing records down the phone line, alternating with the girls who also play records in return. To the boys, this is the closest they have ever been to the girls, and the song-conversation feels intimate. “Though it wasn’t their voices we heard,” they say, “the songs conjured their images more vividly than ever” (196). “Song after song throbbed with secret pain,” they add (197). However, to read these absences of language as representative of the girls’ ultimate lack of autonomy would be, as Debra Shostak warns, to misinterpret the novel. Shostak argues that to accept the boys’ narrative without question “would be to fail the sisters every bit as much as the narrating boys, Trip Fontaine, the Lisbon parents, and the whole watching community fail them – to be implicated, that is, in the inevitability of their objectification” (827). Instead of reading these moments as representative of the girls’ inability to communicate, one can read them as moments that demonstrate the boys’ failure to understand the girls. Hence, instead of reading into the girls’ apparent lack of language in the narrative, which would be to prioritise the boys’ mythical narrative constructions, one must instead focus on the moments in which the girls take autonomous action. These moments, in which the girls take control, demonstrate the Lisbon sisters’ rejection of both the boys’ mythical narration and the mythic identities that are imposed upon them.

While the “view of women as passive has been integral to the male novel of development,” Mary Anne Ferguson argues, women authors “have represented female characters either as finding satisfaction within their limited development in the domestic sphere or as expressing their dissatisfaction through various self-destructive means” (229). In *The Virgin Suicides*, the suicides of the Lisbon sisters should be read as a refusal to be kept within the confines of their household, as well as a rejection of

the identities that the male narrators have constructed for them. Often within the novel there are moments when the boys clearly misinterpret the girls, and consequently discover that the girls act considerably differently than they should do according to the boys' fantasies of them. The girls' opposition to being defined by a male-constructed myth first occurs early on, when the boys go to the Lisbon house for Cecilia's party. Significantly, the boys discover that the house does not match what they had imagined in their "bathroom fantasies": "Instead of a heady atmosphere of feminine chaos, we found the house to be a tidy, dry-looking place that smelled faintly of stale popcorn" (25). Thus, the boys' constructed narrative does not coincide with reality, and this is again demonstrated when they first see all the girls at the party. Though at first the girls appear to the boys as "a congregation of angels," after a while the boys notice differences, and come to recognize that "the Lisbon girls were all different people" (25, 26). "Instead of five replicas with the same blond hair," they narrate, "we saw that they were distinct beings, their personalities beginning to transform their faces and reroute their expressions" (26). This awareness does not last for long, however, and soon after they return to mythical descriptions of the girls, describing Cecilia as a "deranged harlot" (27). However, the moment in which they recognize the girls as individuals is crucial, as it is the first of many in the novel that offers a glimpse into the submerged secondary narrative of *The Virgin Suicides*, in which the Lisbon girls offer contradictions to the narrators' narrative.

Moments of conversation between the male narrators and the Lisbon sisters also confirm a secondary narrative. For example, after the girls return to school after Cecilia's suicide, the boys each try to make conversation with the sisters. One student, Mike Orriyo, introduces himself to Mary, though he is immediately rebutted when she says, "I know who you are. I've only been at this school for like my whole life" (67).

Thus, when the boys do get close to the girls, their preconceptions about how they will behave are undermined, and the boys are surprised that the girls could act of their own accord, outside of their own fantasies about them. When a small group of the boys take the sisters to the Homecoming dance, the narrators ask, “Who had known they talked so much, held so many opinions, jabbed at the world’s sights with so many fingers?” (124). Not only do they misunderstand how well they know the sisters, but also, confined as they are to their own fantasies about the girls, they are surprised when the girls are more intelligent than they expect. One interaction between Joe Conley and Bonnie confirms this:

“It’s always the Big Dipper,” she said. “You look at those charts and they have stars all over the place, but if you look up, all you see is the Big Dipper.”
 “It’s because of the lights,” Joe Hill Conley said. “From the city.”
 “Duh,” Bonnie said. (126)

Clearly, the boys underestimate the girls’ knowledge, to the point of being patronising in their replies to the girls. Within their mythical representation, it seems, they do not exist as real, intelligent beings, but only as vessels for feminine stereotypes. In another crucial moment of projection, after Cecilia’s suicide the boys conclude from her diary entries that she was “a dreamer. Somebody out of touch with reality. When she jumped, she probably thought she’d fly” (42). As Shostak argues, these moments in the narrative “mock the boys’ ability to know the girls and emphasize the ways in which the sisters serve purely as obsessive objects within the narrators’ field of vision” (820). Ironically, it is the boys’ descriptions of the girls that are, fundamentally, out of touch with reality, and this is confirmed at the climax of the novel, on the night the remaining Lisbon sisters collectively decide to commit suicide.

Throughout the latter half of the novel, as the boys try to decipher what is happening inside the isolated Lisbon house, there are clues that the boys’ descriptions of the girls have been entirely fantastical. For example, when the boys are observing

the Lisbon house for movement, they note: “Outside it grew dark. Lights came on down the block, but not in the Lisbon house. We couldn’t see in any better, and in fact the glass panes began to reflect our own gaping faces” (58). This is a symbolic image, and reflects the fact that though the boys try to gain more information about the sisters, they fail, and their narrative ends being more about themselves than the girls they attempt to describe. The boys do not pick up on these clues, though, and continue to present them in a mythical light until they are startled by the girls’ final actions. The shock that the boys experience upon witnessing the girls’ suicides at the end of the novel thus arises from the sudden understanding that they have lost control over the Lisbon girls; the girls finally “fall out of their ritual role” in the boys’ narrative, and take their own action (Shostak 818). On the night of the final suicides, the boys are coaxed over to the Lisbon house via notes placed on their doorsteps. The notes state only, “Tomorrow. Midnight. Wait for our signal,” and the boys take this to mean that they will heroically liberate the girls from their confinement inside the house and take them away (201). In the boys’ fantasises, the escape becomes a military operation. As they descend from the tree house where they have been waiting they describe themselves as “paratroopers,” and they all crawl “army-style” to the Lisbon house (205). Inside, after briefly speaking to Lux, they wait for the other sisters (who, unbeknownst to them, have already begun their suicides) and continue fantasising about their mythical escape from the suburb. “The knowledge welled in us,” they say, “that we would soon be in the car with the girls, driving them out of our green neighbourhood and into the pure, free desolation of back roads we didn’t even know yet” (212). As Kenneth Millard writes, “The American answer to a project in serious decline is to flee, to escape, to begin again elsewhere” (82). It is this solution that the boys subscribe to, imagining themselves as heroes of the New World, ready to settle

somewhere new with the Lisbon sisters. Interestingly, D. H. Lawrence also describes this desire to flee as being a traditional characteristic of the American nation. In *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), describing the emigration of Europeans to America, Lawrence says, “They came largely to get *away* – that most simple of motives ... That’s why most people have come to America, and still do come. To get away from everything they are and have been” (9). However, Lawrence considers this type of enterprise deceiving, as “it isn’t freedom. Rather the reverse. A hopeless sort of constraint” (9). Though the boys in *The Virgin Suicides* evidently believe in this myth of escape, they fail to see how it provides another constraint for the Lisbon sisters. The girls’ individual plans to commit suicide thus provides the most significant rejection of male-constructed American myths in the novel, as they reject the boys’ fantasies, and engineer their liberation from confining gender myths.

As Gilbert and Gubar argue, “Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt the pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which ... deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them” (13). The girls’ suicides represent a chance for the sisters to escape the imprisonment of the boys’ mythical identities and the misogynistic narrative that the boys have created for them. Though the solution in American myth, as Millard argues, is “to flee, to escape,” for the girls, imprisoned as they are within a patriarchal narrative, self-destruction is the only solution. Moreover, if we consider Judith Butler’s argument that “If human existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside the established gender is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question”, then the girl’s suicides become even more understandable (“Variations on Sex and Gender” 27). The “established gender” in *The Virgin Suicides* is clearly the mythical

one that the boys construct, and thus, it is only through death that the girls can escape the constraints of this imposed identity. The girls' suicides horrify the male narrators, who run from the house "screaming without sound," because they have not considered the possibility of the girls taking action themselves (216). Upon finding Bonnie, who has hung herself in the basement of the house, they recognize that, "We had never known her. They had brought us here to find that out" (215). Indeed, they later point out the crucial fact that Bonnie had "died while [they] sat in the living room, dreaming of highways" (216). Thus, the boys' mythical narrative and control over the girls are ultimately superficial, and the girls' suicides represent a dramatic rejection of both the boys' mythical fantasies about, and their plans for, the girls. Hence, the girls fundamentally take back control of the narrative, and their identities, from the boys, and this leaves the boys to conclude in the closing pages that, "they will never find the pieces to put [the sisters] back together" (249). However, as is shown through the retrospective narration, the boys remain enamoured even years later, and still cling to their own mythical preconceptions about the girls' identities.

In 1999, American director Sofia Coppola wrote and directed a film adaptation of Eugenides' novel. This is, thus far, the only adaptation of *The Virgin Suicides*, and it is interesting to consider how a female filmmaker has approached the characterisation of the Lisbon girls for the screen. Feminist critics have frequently paired this film with others from Coppola's oeuvre such as *Lost in Translation* (2003) and *Marie Antoinette* (2006), arguing that her films, on the whole, "narrativize the experience and conditional agency of women" (Smaill 157). However, these types of readings ignore the fact that the movie *The Virgin Suicides* is, as Graham Fuller argues, a "meticulously faithful" adaptation of Eugenides' novel, and thus should

stand-alone from Coppola's original films. However, despite Coppola's faithful adaptation of the novel's images and dialogue, often copying the narration word-for-word from the book, the film continues to mythologise the Lisbon sisters, and often lacks the same dramatic irony which allows for a feminist reading of Eugenides' novel.

The film opens with still shots of normal activity within the Lisbons' suburb, including women walking dogs and children playing in their front garden; following this, the male narrator, voiced by Giovanni Ribisi and operating as spokesperson for the group of boys who narrate the novel, interrupts the dreamy music by saying, "Cecilia was the first to go." Audiences are then shown shots of a bloody bathroom, and Cecilia face-up in the bathtub. The interruption of the male narration in the first few minutes of the film emphasises that the story will be told from a specific point of view; however, for large sections of the film there is no narration, and viewers are shown images of, for example, Cecilia lying in the hospital after her suicide attempt with no male narration to set the scene (Appendix, Figure 1). This leads to the question of the position of the narrators: are they omnipresent in these moments? Or has Coppola been, as Eugenides himself believes, "more intrigued by the girls' story than perhaps the male narration"? (Eugenides, "Making of"). In my opinion, this is difficult to discern, and Coppola continues to waver between the boys' narration and the girls' own authorship throughout the film.

For example, the party scene at the beginning of the novel, which I have discussed in terms of the boys' projection of the sisters' idealised identities, is transformed in Coppola's adaptation into a scene of apparent teenage normalcy, with the boys depicted as awkward and uncomfortable in the presence of the Lisbon sisters. In fact, Coppola uses ironic dialogue similar to that found in Eugenides' novel

to demythologise the girls in this scene, as when Tom Wiener asks Therese, “You’ve heard of Yale?” to which she replies “Oh, yeah” (Figure 2). Therese is also shown laughing off the flirtatious advances of Paul Baldino; therefore, the girls are shown not as “sacramental, sacrificial figures,” but normalised teenagers who the boys clearly do not understand (Scott). However, though this seems to support a feminist reading of the film, generally Coppola seems to place more emphasis on the boys’ narration, as demonstrated by the frequent dream sequences within the film.

These dream sequences clearly position the girls within a very specific feminine narrative, one that idealises their innocence and youth. These recurring images – which include visual illustrations of parts of Cecilia’s diary as the boys read it aloud and the inclusion of photographs from the boys’ imaginary adventures with the girls – evidently coincide with the dreamy quality of the film itself, which emphasises teenage innocence and naivety. However, they also demonstrate that “the film’s representation of the sisters, and the past in general, reside in the collective memory of the boys” (Hoskin 216). Indeed, the sequence in which the boys lust over Cecilia’s journal and imagine the girls playing in a field at evening, contains images of the boys and the Lisbon sisters overlapping in the frame, making it clear to the audience that these scenes are taking place inside the boys’ minds (Figure 3). Additionally, the imaginary holiday pictures emphasise the boys’ idealised desires to assist in the sisters’ escape, which is also demonstrated in the imagined scene of the boys taking the girls away in their car (Figure 4; Figure 5). This scene, which I have already described as being important in the novel for its insistence on the traditional American narrative of rebirth and escape, is visualised on screen along with background sounds of the girls laughing and singing. Hence, Coppola’s inclusion of these scenes in the film seems to contribute to a mythological view of the Lisbon

sisters, in which they are indeed constructed by the boys in their narrative and do not exist as real figures.

Thus, I would ultimately agree with A. O. Scott, who argues that Coppola's adaptation "doesn't mourn the girls so much as embalm them." Indeed, Coppola herself suggests that this was the purpose of her film when she says, "The story is really a reflection of these boys when they're older, looking back on this time when they had this infatuation and this obsession with these ideal girls and these girls were kind of these magical, beautiful creatures" ("Making of"). Through the use of fantasy elements in the film, such as the dream sequences and scenes in which Cecilia's ghost appears to the neighbourhood boys, the film seems to present the girls as magical figures who are destined to remain young, just as the male narration in the novel also supports this mythological reading (Figure 6). Thus, though at times it is difficult to discern whose gaze is really prioritised in Coppola's adaptation, in adapting the novel for the screen Coppola has lost the internal secondary narrative of Eugenides' novel – the girls' true voices – that is so crucial to reading the girls as autonomous figures. Removing this secondary narrative results in an adaptation that, though faithful, remains superficial.

**Chapter 3: “The Unstable Bedrock of Human Invention”: Subversive Female
Identity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping***

The male-narration in *The Virgin Suicides* repeatedly upholds Gilbert and Gubar’s observation that “[f]rom Eve, Minerva, Sophia, and Galatea onwards ... patriarchal mythology defines women as created by, from, and for men, the children of male brains, ribs, and ingenuity” (12). This patriarchal mythology is also especially prevalent in the literature of the American West, which frequently contains generic conventions that “celebrate male experience – variations upon the idea of boys lighting out for the territory to escape the civilising threat of women” (Rosowski, *Birthing a Nation* ix). In *Housekeeping* (1980), Marilynne Robinson revises this mythology, writing a novel in which the two protagonists, including the first-person narrator, are female, and inhabit a typically masculine environment – a small town in Idaho on the edge of an untamed wilderness. Sarah D. Hartshorne argues that in *Housekeeping*, Robinson has taken the myth of the wilderness created by American writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry David Thoreau and “has made this tradition contemporary and has made it female” (50). However, the West, as we have seen, is typically the scene for the rendering of patriarchal fantasies, including the male fantasy of the American Adam. As Jonathan Mitchell notes, “Being the American Adam is the fantasy resulting from the projection of desire upon [the] frontier” (23). As Mitchell points out, the frontier has frequently been depicted in American historical and literary scholarship as “character-building,” for example in Frederick Jackson Turner’s seminal essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”. If the American Adam is the ideal (masculine) American figure,

then the Adamic myth is intrinsically tied to the idea of the Western wilderness, the supposedly empty space in which the New World Adam can be reborn.

Housekeeping is narrated by Ruth Stone, and she describes her and her sister Lucille's childhood in the town of Fingerbone. After their mother commits suicide, the sisters are taken under the care of their grandmother, and, following their grandmother's death, by their great-aunts. Finally, their Aunt Sylvie, a transient, returns to Fingerbone and provides a radically different type of maternal care. In her article "Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: The Subversive Narrative and the New American Eve," Maureen Ryan argues that Sylvie and Ruth are American Eves, female characters who "[refuse] to be defined by others" and, "like the classic male American hero, abandon home and civilization and embark on an unknown journey" at the end of the novel (83, 85). However, like Kolodny and other scholars who have designated certain female characters in American literature as American Eves, Ryan fails to fully articulate what this subversive identity means. Though Ryan concludes her article by stating that Robinson "presents a new narrative for a new American Eve," aside from the fact that these female characters inhabit a traditionally male landscape, it is difficult to see what precisely makes Ruth and Sylvie American Eves (86). In Ryan's view, these characters are simply female equivalents of the American Adam: women who appear non-traditional compared to the rest of their society's accepted model of femininity and therefore offer a contrast to stereotypical female characters in male-authored novels about the American frontier. As is the case with the Lisbon sisters' home environment in *The Virgin Suicides*, "a community that allows for some fluidity does not exist" in Fingerbone, and thus Sylvie and Ruth do indeed appear as subversive female characters within their Western environment (Caver 118). However, to define Sylvie and Ruth as American Eves is problematic,

especially in a novel such as *Housekeeping* that, as Ryan argues, is “complex” and “often amorphous” (80). Ryan succumbs to the masculine-defined American myth of Adam in order to describe why Ruth’s femininity is subversive, and thus she categorises a female character that, ironically, “refuses to be defined by others” (Ryan 83). I will argue that the characters of Ruth and Sylvie in *Housekeeping* actually reject such a mythical labelling, as their identities are constantly shifting in the novel. As Ryan also argues, Ruth “resists narrative conventions and social restrictions,” and this consequently makes it impossible to categorise her as a female type of any sort, especially within the Adamic fantasy (83). Hence, in *Housekeeping*, as in *The Virgin Suicides*, the female protagonists reject mythical identities, and instead offer a fluctuating notion of self that cannot be categorised, especially not within the myth of the American Eve.

As in my analysis of Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*, I identify a symbolic structure in *Housekeeping* in which the ending of the novel demonstrates a full rejection of the construction of mythic feminine identity. Joan Kirkby offers a similar reading of *Housekeeping*’s structure:

The gradual, graceful process of de-evolution, of de-civilising, that the novel enacts is also a rejection of the patriarchal values that have dominated American culture and a return to values and modes of being that have been associated in myth and imagery with the province of the female. (92)

However, I would disagree with Kirkby’s reading that the final scenes of the novel offer a return to mythic modes of femininity. Instead, Robinson depicts Ruth and Sylvie as complex women who embrace both typically feminine *and* masculine forms of identity, residing in an unstable space between identity categories. Thus, while Kirkby argues that the novel’s dialectic structure represents “a reverse evolutionary process, from patriarchal to matriarchal rule, then to a state of nature,” I argue that the novel’s third state is in fact a rejection of mythic conceptions of identity (98).

Marilynne Robinson's comments about her novel seem to support this reading, especially when she states:

I wanted to write a book about women that was not a feminist book. It seems to me, in a way, that is the ultimate feminism. When you can actually *put aside that category* and write about women, but not as if you were writing about people who are some minor or special strain in the species rather than being simply human. (qtd. in Showalter, *A Jury of Her Peers* 473, added emphasis)

It is clear, therefore, that Robinson did not write these female characters with any specific categories in mind, and therefore Ruth and Sylvie are free to embody a variety of contrasting gender identities within the novel. Indeed, *Housekeeping* is a much more complex novel in this regard than *The Virgin Suicides*, as Robinson not only questions the mythology of the frontier and the West in her novel, but also explores the idea of the traditional family unit, the power of nature, and the question of transience and homelessness. Elizabeth A. Meese describes this as the novel's "pentimento effect," and argues that readers are required to "[sift] through the levels of consciousness, through the legacy of history in an effort to comprehend the present or to anticipate the future" (63). To conclude that the novel only explores issues of gender identity or Western mythology is thus to undermine the novel's dense and textured symbolism, as well as Robinson's interest in greater philosophical themes such as loss, death, and mourning.

The opening pages of *Housekeeping* immediately place the novel within a narrative tradition that includes both mythological Western narratives as well as Biblical narratives. Ruth begins by explaining her own history, identifying herself as a descendent of women: "I grew up with my younger sister Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher" (3). This genealogy, "a revision of Biblical patrilinear genealogies," places Ruth

predominantly in the care and company of women; however, Ruth also explains the history of her grandfather, Edmund Foster, in these opening pages, as it was “he who put us down in this unlikely place”, the town of Fingerbone (Ravits 645; *Housekeeping* 3). Ruth describes Edmund Foster as always harbouring a strong desire to live in the American West: one day he “walked to the railroad, and took a train west. He told the ticket agent that he wanted to go to the mountains, and the man arranged to have him put off here” (4). Hence, the fact that Ruth and Lucille’s mother, Helen, is born in Fingerbone, and that they return here upon her death, is because of their grandfather’s desire to go west in the first place, and his “commitment to a quintessentially western mythology of mobility and rebirth” (Millard 132). Feminist critics have interpreted the death of Edmund Foster in a “spectacular derailment” (5) as a crucial demonstration of Robinson’s rejection of masculine tropes of the West. Describing Edmund Foster as “the Creator, Noah, Adam, the American frontiersman, the American Adam, the primitive man,” Sarah D. Hartshorne argues that his death ultimately symbolises a rejection of patriarchal Western culture, as Robinson “sends him and all the past worlds and fables he represents to the bottom of Lake Fingerbone” (50, 51). However, the fact that the story of Edmund is “hedged with doubt and uncertainty” is also crucial (Millard 132). Ruth chooses to narrate the Edmund’s history despite the fact that he “escaped this world years before [she] entered it” (3), and, thus, the story of his life can be read as a potentially unreliable reconstruction. Hence, Robinson also depicts the mythology of the West, which Edmund represents in his characterisation as a traditional frontiersman, as suspect. In removing the family patriarch in the first few pages of the novel, Robinson deconstructs the myth of the West as well as notions of the traditional family unit, and leaves the rest of the novel open to more complex explorations of identity and family.

Thus, Edmund's "derailment" also ignites Robinson's exploration of more worldly notions of tradition in *Housekeeping*, and functions as a metaphorical "derailing" of our accepted notions of family.

Though Edmund is physically absent from the plot of *Housekeeping*, his death haunts the remainder of the novel, especially Ruth's narration. In fact, in a symbolic plot moment Ruth reveals that her mother, Edmund's daughter, also died by drowning in Lake Fingerbone, in a suicidal act of driving her car into the lake. Thus, the lake becomes a significant place in the novel that ties the remaining female members of the Foster family to Fingerbone through their family history. Indeed, Ruth frequently describes the lake as possessing mysterious power, and says early on in the novel that, "one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below" (9). Additionally, after their grandmother's death Ruth dreams that she is walking across Lake Fingerbone, and describes how "the surface that I walked on proved to be knit up of hands and arms and upturned faces that shifted and quickened as I stepped, sinking only for a moment into lower relief under my weight" (41). Hence, Ruth's ancestry is always present in the landscape of the town, especially within the lake itself, a crucial symbol of both fluidity and instability. This is reflected in the unconventional family unit that Ruth and Lucille are born into, living with their mother and having never met their father. One of the only mentions of Reginald Stone, Ruth and Lucille's father, is when Ruth narrates a scene in which Helen receives a letter from him, and promptly "tore the envelope into fourths and dropped them in the trash" (52). Here, another male character is relegated to obscurity in the narrative, again reflecting Robinson's choice to place women at the centre of her vision of the American West. However, this scene also reflects the uncertainty of Ruth and Lucille's childhood, and the unconventional family unit they grow into.

Indeed, their mother, Helen Stone, is also not a traditional mother, and Ruth describes her mother's approach to care giving by saying, "Our mother swept and dusted, kept our anklets white, and fed us vitamins" (110). This description gestures to Helen's over-scrupulous form of maternal care, which also betrays emotional distance. Similarly, Ruth narrates that Helen "tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone" (109). Hence, their mother represents the first stage of the gradual decline of traditional constructions of feminine identity in the novel, which was initially sparked by the derailment of a conventional masculine identity with Edmund Foster's death. Robinson uses the genealogy of women described by Ruth in the opening pages to explore unconventional family units, in which women try but fail to hold up traditional maternal traits, and this continues with the introduction of grandmother Foster and, thereafter, aunts Lily and Nona.

Descriptions of Grandmother Foster and her children, Helen, Sylvie, and Molly, in the aftermath of Edmund's death depict their family life as seemingly idyllic. Indeed, these descriptions are reminiscent of scenes in another American female bildungsroman, Louisa May-Alcott's *Little Women*. Ruth narrates: "After their father's death, the girls hovered around her, watched everything she did, followed her through the house, got in her way" (10). "When their mother sat down with her mending," Ruth says, "they would settle themselves around her on the floor, trying to be comfortable" (10). Though at this moment in the novel Grandmother Foster seems like a traditional mother figure, Ruth's descriptions of this period betrays, once again, a notable absence in the home. Ruth says that her grandmother "had always known a thousand ways to circle [her daughters] all around with what must have *seemed* like grace [my italics]," a phrase which hints at the perfunctory nature of Grandmother

Foster's care (11). Indeed, when Ruth says that their grandmother cared for her and Lucille "very well," it was also "like someone reliving a long day in a dream" (24). Though well-meant, their grandmother's care-taking is indeed very much like their mother's, being more fleeting than emotional, and this suggests that the women in the Foster family cannot seem to fulfil a traditional maternal role. As Ruth comments, "it seemed to me my grandmother saw our black souls dancing in the moonless cold and offered us deep-dish apple pie as a gesture of well-meaning and despair" (26). This lack of a necessary and fulfilling mother figure is continued in the figures of aunts Lily and Nona, who take over the care of the sisters upon the death of grandmother Foster.

Upon Lily and Nona's arrival in Fingerbone, Ruth describes them as "maiden ladies, of a buxomly maternal appearance that contrasted oddly with their brusque, unpracticed pats and kisses" (29). This description is telling of Lily and Nona's lack of conventional maternal qualities, and hence, they also represent the lack of a traditional motherly figure in the novel. Ruth remarks, for example, that Lily and Nona "were not in the habit of cooking," and ultimately, they feel only "alarm" in the responsibility of taking care of Ruth and Lucille (32, 36). Moreover, it is also revealed that before moving into the Foster home in Fingerbone, Lily and Nona lived in a "basement room in the red-brick and upright Hartwick Hotel," an unconventional abode for two middle-aged women and comparable to the transient life Sylvie has, whose first known address is the "Lost Hills Hotel, Billings, Montana" (28, 39). Additionally, the aunts also represent a link to the Adamic mythology that Robinson deconstructs in the novel. Through Ruth's narration, it becomes clear that what Lily and Nona fear in their responsibility for the sisters is that the girls will grow up and, significantly, lose their innocence. Lily and Nona begin their care responsibilities in a

“hard winter,” and Ruth explains that, “some houses in Fingerbone simply fell from the weight of snow on their roofs, a source of grave and perpetual anxiety to my great-aunts” (32, 33). However, this tragedy is overshadowed by Lily and Nona’s real anxiety, which Ruth elaborates on: “And granting that this and even subsequent winters might spare us, there were still the perils of adolescence, of marriage, of childbirth, all formidable in themselves, but how many times compounded by our strange history?” (36). Thus, the threat posed by the weather is not as great as that posed by the girls’ own growth as, in the eyes of Lily and Nona, Ruth and Lucille “perpetually threatened to cough or outgrow [their] shoes” (32). Fundamentally, there is a wish expressed here that the girls should remain frozen in childhood, and not endure the trials of life; hence, Lily and Nona wish them to remain as innocent as the pre-lapsarian Adam in the myth, an individual who is “undefiled by the usual inheritances of family” (Lewis 5). Thus, not only do Lily and Nona continue the unconventional maternal care of Ruth and Lucille’s mother and grandmother, they are also linked to a mythology that seeks to contain Ruth and Lucille’s identities. However, it is with Sylvie’s introduction that the further derailment of the family unit is metaphorically stalled. Though Ruth will describe her and her sister’s longing for a mother throughout the narrative, as Elizabeth Meese explains, “Sylvie succeeds as a mother in the most elemental way that others have not – she stays” (60).

Before Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone, Ruth overhears Lily and Nona discussing her aunt, and their descriptions of her are significant. They call Sylvie an “itinerant,” “a migrant worker,” and “a drifter,” all derogatory descriptions of her failure to settle (31). Owing to Sylvie’s life of transience, Lily and Nona express a wish that Fingerbone may provide “a sense of home” to Sylvie (39). The first scene in which Sylvie appears in the novel immediately demonstrates the fluidity of Sylvie’s identity,

as by entering the town unexpectedly, Sylvie defies Lily and Nona's preconceptions. Ruth describes the moment Sylvie arrives, saying: "And then one day as we sat at supper in the kitchen, and [Lily and Nona] worried between them about [Sylvie] not writing back, and remembered her as too dreaming and self-absorbed to be ordinarily considerate, and hoped she was not ill, Sylvie knocked at the door" (44). It is clear that Lily and Nona both consider Sylvie too irresponsible to come to Fingerbone and care for Ruth and Lucille; however, this moment radically alters that perception of her. It is crucial that Sylvie appears at this precise moment in the novel, as it presents her character as fundamentally unpredictable.

Sylvie's physical appearance at this crucial moment in the novel also reflects her fluid identity, as she seems to possess what are traditionally defined as masculine and feminine traits. Ruth describes how she came into the kitchen "with a quiet that seemed compounded of gentleness and stealth and self-effacement" (45). While "stealth" may have masculine connotations, Sylvie's gentleness and demureness are stereotypically feminine traits. This blending of gender identities continues in Ruth's description of the clothes she is wearing. Sylvie wears a dress of "deep green, with a satiny shine," which prompts an exclamation from Lily, who says, "What a lovely dress!" (45). According to Ruth, Sylvie seemed "clearly pleased that it had made an impression," and also takes care with the rest of her appearance: "as [Sylvie] stood there, she smoothed the stray hairs back" from her face, "making herself neat for us" (46, 45). However, the care Sylvie has taken with her appearance contrasts with other aspects of her physical description, including her raincoat, which Ruth says "was so shapeless and oversized that she must have found it on a bench" (45). Thus, Sylvie's clothes are also a reflection of her gender ambiguity in the novel – she simultaneously appears as both masculine and feminine. In proclaiming Sylvie to be an American

Eve figure, feminist critics seem to ignore these discrepancies in her appearance, as well as these symbolic descriptions of Sylvie that reject a stable gender identity. For example, Sylvie's also wears a brooch of a "little bunch of lilies of the valley," a flower that brides often carry to symbolise new beginnings, but which also carries connotations of despair: in Christian mythology the flower was created from Eve's tears when she was expelled from the Garden of Eden ("May Birth Flower"). Thus, Sylvie exhibits an ambiguous identity, and this makes it difficult to categorise her. Sylvie identity becomes increasingly unstable in *Housekeeping*, and Robinson represents this deconstruction of essentialist, mythical identities in various symbolic scenes that occur immediately after Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone.

In the week following Sylvie's arrival, the town experienced "three days of brilliant sunshine and four of balmy rain" (60). Ruth describes how "the snow was so dense and malleable that [she and Lucille] made a sort of statue" out of the snow: "while in any particular she seemed crude and lopsided, altogether her figure suggested a woman standing in a cold wind" (60, 61). However, despite their desire that "the lady would stand long enough to freeze," as they mould her from the snow "her head pitched over and smashed on the ground" (61). "We made a new snowball for her head," Ruth narrates, "but it crushed her eaten neck, and under the weight of it a shoulder dropped away" (61). Scholars such as Martha Ravitz have interpreted this scene as symbolising Ruth and Lucille's longing for a mother; Ravitz argues that the snow-woman becomes a "silent mother figure" (657). Indeed, though Ruth narrates that later in the day the statue becomes a "dog-yellowed stump," she adds that neither she nor Lucille "would admit any interest" in it, disguising their desire for the statue to remain stable (61). Later in the novel, during a reflection on her own ancestry, Ruth narrates, "[p]erhaps we all awaited a resurrection," a statement indicative of Ruth's

desire for her family to appear whole again (96). “What are these fragments for,” Ruth asks, “if not be knit up finally?” (92). Hence, the snow-woman they create stands for “the silent mother figure” that Ruth wishes to resurrect from the past (Ravits 657). However, the snow’s inability to remain in the desired shape also reflects the unstable nature of the female identities in *Housekeeping*, and suggests that the ascension that Ruth craves cannot be achieved. Instead, Robinson “move[s] beyond conventional social patterns,” and presents Sylvie as a mother figure who, with her fluid identity, offers a new type of maternal care (Ravits 666).

In another symbolic episode that occurs shortly after Sylvie arrives, Fingerbone experiences severe flooding, and Ruth describes how “the houses and hutches and barns and sheds of Fingerbone were like so many spilled and foundered arks” (61). Christine Caver emphasises the separation between the Foster house and the others in Fingerbone during the flood, arguing that this distance “[makes] literal the distance between Sylvie and the conventional world” (123). It is also significant that though in previous years the Foster home remained impervious to flooding, this year the flood severely affects their household too. Ruth describes how “[their] grandmother always boasted that the floods never reached [their] house, but that spring, water poured over the thresholds and covered the floor to the depth of four inches, obliging [them] to wear boots while we did the cooking and washing up” (61). Moreover, the water entering the home defies the boundaries created by Edmund, “the designer and builder of [their] very odd home” (Munchow 18). We are told that Edmund “had had the good judgement to set [the house] on a hill,” so that in former times, “[they] rarely had more than a black pool in [their] cellar” (74, 50). However, now the house becomes saturated with floodwater, and Ruth says that, “If we opened or closed a door, a wave swept through the house” (62). Symbolically, it is the

presence of Sylvie, whose transient existence poses a challenge to the ordered boundaries of the house erected by Edmund, which causes the flood to pour over the previously impermeable boundaries of the house. Thus, as Sarah Munchow argues, the house becomes “a liminal space that breaks down the heretofore imagined demarcation between traditional, established patriarchy and the subversive female agent,” represented by Sylvie (19).

Indeed, the flood also foreshadow the schism that will open later in the novel between Lucille and Ruth, when Lucille chooses to leave the Foster home and live with her Home Economics teacher, Mrs Royce (140). When Ruth, Sylvie and Lucille are contemplating the flood, Lucille observes, “I don’t think the Simmons’s house is where it should be” (65). Evidently, Lucille holds on to the fiction of an ordered existence, where everything – including Fingerbone’s houses, or, as becomes clearer later in the novel, female identity – is where it ought to be. Sylvie, meanwhile, responds to Lucille by saying, “It’s so hard to tell”: a moment that clearly demonstrates her reluctance to categorise objects (65). Thus, the flood is a symbolic moment in the novel that demonstrates the house becoming a reflection of Sylvie’s transient identity. The flooding of the Foster home also initiates the gradual change in Ruth, who starts to break certain gender boundaries and comes to inhabit the same liminal space as Sylvie.

Even before the arrival of Sylvie in Fingerbone, Ruth and Lucille are different from the other children in town, and their great-aunts. For example, Ruth explains that they used to take their ice skates to school, “so that [they] could go to the lake directly and stay there through the twilight” (34). “Usually,” Ruth narrates, “we would skate along the edge of the swept ice, tracing its shape, and coming finally to its farthest edge, we would sit on the snow and look back at Fingerbone” (34). This demonstrates

the distance Ruth and Lucille feel between themselves and the town; indeed, “only [they] and the ice sweepers went out so far, and only [they] stayed” (34). After Sylvie arrives, the sisters also demonstrate their gradually loosening identities by skipping school in order to go to the lake. About their truancy, Ruth narrates that they continually “expected someone to step out from behind a rabbit hutch or a tree or the sheets on a clothesline to question us, but no one did” (78-9). Hence, the arrival of Sylvie in their lives enables Ruth and Lucille to begin to stray from the strict types of identity that are expected from them. Here, Robinson is also deconstructing stereotypes of the West through Ruth, playing on the sisters’ expectations of the environment and their surprise at being allowed to stray from school and the town so easily. However, Ruth and Lucille are not yet entirely comfortable with this newfound freedom, and thus are not yet embodiments of the same liminal identity as Sylvie. For example, Ruth experiences “the days [as] unnaturally lengthy and spacious. We felt small in the landscape, and out of place” (79). Though the sisters are beginning to distance themselves from the town, and from the strict forms of identity that Fingerbone represents, they remain uncomfortable with their new position. In comparison, Sylvie appears to be living in an entirely different universe, as demonstrated in the scene in chapter five when Ruth and Lucille see Sylvie at the lake. Ruth says: “It was Thursday that we saw Sylvie at the shore. She did not see us” (80). Later in the same chapter, Ruth remarks, “Clearly our aunt was not a stable person,” a comment that seems to refer to Sylvie’s mental state, but instead demonstrates their awareness of the fluid identity that the sisters see Sylvie representing (82). Hence, Sylvie seems entirely “other” to the sisters, as they do not yet inhabit the same liminal space she does. However, other gradual changes occur in this middle section of the novel as Lucille comes to reject Sylvie’s fluid identity.

At the end of chapter five, Ruth notices the gradual change that has occurred in Lucille: “I was content with Sylvie, so it was a surprise to me when I realized that Lucille had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore” (92). The metaphor of the boat is highly significant, as it suggests that Lucille longs for land, and, consequently, a stable and foundational identity; on the other hand, Ruth and Sylvie clearly feel more comfortable with a fluid identity, symbolized by the water. While gradually Ruth begins to assume a transient identity, Robinson writes that “Lucille’s loyalties were with the other world” (95); rather than implying that Lucille inhabits a heavenly realm, I interpret this as Robinson demonstrating that Lucille is gradually sympathising more with the “other world” of Fingerbone. Whereas before Sylvie occupied a world of her own, now it seems that Ruth has also crossed the divide into Sylvie’s world and, consequently, Lucille’s rejection of this fluid identity seems “otherworldly” to her. Indeed, in further evidence of Ruth’s unstable identity, Ruth describes her and Lucille’s experiences of puberty: “[Lucille’s] tiny, child-nippled breasts filled her with shame and me with alarm. While she became a small woman, I became a towering child” (97). Though Lucille is clearly growing into an identifiable gender identity, Ruth remains a “towering child” with no clear gender identity. Though at this point in the novel Lucille and Ruth still seem to be growing into their respective identities, or non-identities in the case of Ruth, the scene in which the sisters spend the night on Lake Fingerbone serves as a conclusion to the process of gradual change. Thus, this scene demonstrates both Lucille’s rejection of a fluid identity and Ruth’s embrace of it.

Ruth describes how she and Lucille spend a lot of time in the woods outside of Fingerbone; however, while Ruth “went to the woods for the woods’ own sake,” in

Ruth's eyes, Lucille "seemed to be enduring a banishment there" (99). This banishment can be interpreted as a banishment from the conventional identity that Fingerbone represents, and an uneasiness at being aligned with Ruth's unconventional femininity; Ruth admits, "I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness," indicating their tied identities at this moment (98). In chapter seven, symbolically located almost halfway through the novel, during one of these routine trips to the forest, the sisters realise "[they] had stayed too long" and must commit to staying on the shore of Lake Fingerbone overnight (114). This scene is full of symbolic descriptions of the landscape, which emphasize that this scene is intended to represent the unstable identity space that Lucille eventually rejects. For example, Ruth says that both she and Lucille "were frightened at the thought of making our way along the miles of difficult shore, with the black woods above us on our right hand and only the lake on our left" (114). Hence, the shore becomes an undefined area between two kinds of wilderness, the forest and the lake. Additionally, descriptions of the weather also suggest a liminal quality to the landscape; as Ruth suggests, "Evening seemed to have struck an equilibrium. The sky and the water were one luminous gray" (114). Not only is this significant because it suggests a blending of the landscape, but earlier in the novel, Ruth tells readers that evening was Sylvie's "special time of day. She gave the word three syllables, and indeed I think she liked it so well for its tendency to smooth, to soften" (99). Thus, Ruth and Lucille's reactions to the night spent on the lake are a reflection of their capacity to embrace a liminal identity as Sylvie does. Though both Ruth and Lucille sleep "uneasily" that night, Ruth, after a while, "simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones" (115, 116). Hence, in this moment, Ruth fully embraces the ambivalent landscape, and allows herself to become part of it as

well. Interestingly, Tace Hedrick argues that in this scene, “Ruth’s longed-for darkness is that place without perimeters, which exists *in contrast* to the invasive, boundary-breaching, ghost-ridden darkness of the lake’s water” (148). Though Ruth describes the lake’s depths as a type of darkness, saying, “it is true that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below,” the lake still represents an area with boundaries, and is not a comforting space (9). Later in the novel, while on the lake with Sylvie, Ruth fantasies about their boat capsizing: “It was the order of the world, after all, that water should pry through the seams of husks, which, pursed and tight as they might be, are only made for breaching” (162). Hence, a distinction should be made between the darkness that Ruth embraces, the boundless darkness inside herself, and the lake’s darkness, which Ruth perceives as a confining darkness that is tied to traditional social order. “When the light began to come,” Lucille, however, “began to walk towards Fingerbone. She did not speak to me or look back” (116-7). Thus, Lucille decidedly rejects this liminal space in favour of the more stable and conventional gender identity offered by Fingerbone; indeed, once they are home, Ruth finds Lucille “dressed in a dark cotton skirt and a white blouse, setting her hair” (119). After her experience of a liminal identity, Lucille consequently decides to revert to a traditional femininity, and Ruth remarks that Lucille possessed an ability “to look the way one was supposed to look” (121). However, as Elizabeth A. Meese contends, Robinson uses the dichotomy between Ruth and Lucille to “challenge the reader’s more superficial response,” that is, that convention is bad and transience good (61). As Meese points out, Robinson sympathises with Lucille, and presents her absence from the Foster home as “a real loss for the characters in the novel, who forgive and regret and search” (61). Indeed, at the end of the novel, after Sylvie and Ruth have left Fingerbone, Ruth imagines

Lucille living in the Foster house again: “I imagine it is Lucille, fiercely neat, stalemating the forces of ruin” (216). Ruth also says that “[s]omeday when I am feeling presentable I will go into Fingerbone and make inquiries” about Lucille, reflecting the loss she feels at Lucille’s absence (217). Hence, in *Housekeeping*, “the breaking of family ties is never final,” and Lucille’s decision to side with conventionality is neither chided nor questioned, resulting in an ambiguous conclusion (Ravitz 666). Thus, though some critics have chosen to emphasise the dichotomies in the novel, describing Ruth and Sylvie as triumphant American Eves who champion the forces of constraint in Fingerbone, the narrative of Lucille’s departure from the home fundamentally undermines this argument, favouring instead a more complex depiction of identity in which transience and conventionality are not dichotomous, both being described as valid responses to loss.

Whereas earlier, Ruth had felt that she shared a “single consciousness” with Lucille, after Lucille’s departure from the home Ruth’s identity seems to merge with Sylvie’s. One scene specifically in chapter eight, in which Sylvie and Ruth explore the area around Lake Fingerbone, represents this merging of their identities and also functions as a symbolic rejection of the Adamic mythology. Only a few days after Lucille leaves home, Sylvie takes Ruth to see an abandoned house on the other side of Lake Fingerbone. As they leave the house that morning, Ruth says: “Sylvie was in front in me, and I put my hands in my pockets, and tilted my head, and strode, as she did, and it was as if I was her shadow” (144-5). “We are the same,” Ruth reflects, “She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child” (145). Hence, Ruth begins to see herself as a reflection of Sylvie and “to form herself in Sylvie’s shape, rejecting separation, difference, and identity in order to embrace connection and similarity” (Kaviola 687). It is significant to note

that the American Adam, and thus the American Eve, “emerged from a conviction of unlikeness” (Martin 3). In Lewis’ descriptions of the American Adam, and traditional descriptions of the frontiersman in frontier literature, individuality is championed over commonality, and thus the similarity that characterises Ruth and Sylvie’s relationship directly contrasts with expressions of difference that are at the heart of a distinctively “American” identity. The merging of their identities, then, represents a rejection of a mythical singular identity, and the descriptions of the lakeside scene that follow further deconstruct this mythology. As she and Sylvie cross the lake in a small boat, Ruth notes that, “To the east the mountains were eclipsed. To the west they stood in balmy light” (149). Not only does this position Ruth and Sylvie, once again, in an undefined space, but through the symbolic language the scene also re-enacts a traditional American mythology of the West as a place of hope and new beginnings, the same patriarchal mythology represented by Ruth’s grandfather, Edmund. However, Robinson uses this scene to demythologise the West, and thus remove Sylvie and Ruth from a similar mythological identity. Instead of to a place of beauty, Sylvie brings Ruth to a place where “the mountains that walled the valley were too close, the one upon the other. The rampages of glaciers in their eons of slow violence had left the landscape in a great disorder. Out from the cleft or valley the mountains made spilled a lap of spongy earth, overgrown with bush” (150). This symbolic language suggests a scene of chaos, and the “spongy earth” suggests it is a place lacking in solid foundations. Moreover, Ruth goes on to describe a “stunted orchard and lilacs and stone doorstep and fallen house, all white with a brine of frost” (150-1). Susan J. Rosowski argues that this scene depicts “remnants of the Edenic life that once filled the place” (184); when considering Ruth and Sylvie in light of the American Eve figure, this landscape thus becomes highly symbolic. Robinson uses

this scene to demonstrate the unreality of Western mythology, as a space of constructed idealism with no place in reality.

At this point in the novel, Ruth and Sylvie's embrace of a liminal identity is threatened by Fingerbone's traditional society, whose representatives see Sylvie's type of care as irresponsible. Describing the thoughts of their neighbours in Fingerbone, Ruth narrates, "Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient of me" (177). Judith Butler argues that, "In so far as social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms" ("Variations" 27). To exist in Fingerbone, as it is to exist in the Lisbon's suburb in *The Virgin Suicides*, requires a stable identity; since Ruth no longer embodies a stable identity, "it was important to the town to believe that [she] should be rescued" (178). Consequently, a hearing is scheduled to decide Ruth's fate, and Sylvie and Ruth decide that they must leave Fingerbone; "I could not stay," Ruth explains, "and Sylvie would not stay without me" (209). The ending of the novel, in which Ruth and Sylvie burn the Foster house and leave Fingerbone via the railroad tracks over the lake, thus represents a full rejection of Western mythology *and* traditional stable feminine identities tied to the home, as demonstrated in the symbolic burning of Edmund Foster's house. As Karen Kaviola argues, "the only alternative to the status quo the text makes possible is transience"; however, this transience is not simply a rejection of civilisation as in the Adamic myth (671). Ruth describes her and Sylvie's new life, saying, "Now and then I take a job as a waitress, or a clerk, and it is pleasant for a while. Sylvie and I see all the movies" (213-4). Hence, Ruth and Sylvie do not settle for a life in the wilderness, as is the case with many Adamic characters in American literature. Instead, they occupy a boundary between wilderness and civilisation, a more complex and fluid

space, and thus they both represent a refusal to be categorised. Thus, *Housekeeping* offers a similar argument to Judith Butler's; that, fundamentally, "gender identity rests on the unstable bedrock of human invention" ("Variations" 27). *Housekeeping* thus offers space for fluid feminine identity, and Ruth and Sylvie prove that it is possible to escape gender conventions without having to die, as is the case with the Lisbon sisters in *The Virgin Suicides*. In *Housekeeping*, "to stray outside of established gender" is *not* "to put one's very existence into question" (Butler, "Variations" 27); instead, Robinson's novel offers a space for fluid gender identities, and rejects the categorisation of feminine identity.

Conclusion

As Viorica Patea argues, “the Adamic myth emerged as the cultural and foundational myth of the American experience,” and scholars have contributed to the construction of this myth, using it to explain America’s unique identity and history (15). However, the myth of the American Adam has also been used to eliminate the debilitating feminine presence from the American experience – in other words, to “recreate the Garden of Eden without Eve” (Long 3). As I have shown, critical works on the American Adam, including R. W. B. Lewis’ original study and Jonathan Mitchell’s twentieth-century revision of the myth, have frequently excluded female characters from being part of this mythology. It is appealing, therefore, for scholars to construct the identity of the American Eve for female characters and in doing so metaphorically bring Eve back to the Garden of Eden, and back into the mythology of America.

In this thesis, I have aimed to demonstrate the problems with the creation of the mythological identity of the American Eve. Not only is this identity historically problematic, having been created from the masculine-defined myth of the American Adam, but the method of constructing this identity also goes against many fundamental aims of feminist criticism. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler questions “the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity” (6). This is also a fundamental problem with the American Eve; though various scholars have used it to define female characters in American literature, it results in an attempt by scholars to judge female characters according to the American Adam, and consequently writes female characters into further problematic categories, rather than bringing them out of these constraints. As Butler states, “constraining gender norms work to subdue the exercise of gender

freedom,” and this is what should be avoided in works of feminist criticism (“Variations” 27).

Thus, I have analysed novels that present radically different types of female characters, ones who refuse to be confined by constructed boundaries of identity, especially mythical ones. In Jeffrey Eugenides’ *The Virgin Suicides*, the male narrators clearly mythologize the Lisbon sisters; however, through various means, including their group suicide at the end of the novel, the Lisbon sisters react against their mythical identities, refusing to be confined to a male-constructed vision of femininity. Though they cannot survive in the novel, their suicides are a radical act that demonstrates their ability to claim agency, and dictate their own identities. Similarly, in *Housekeeping*, Sylvie and Ruth are subversive female characters, and Marilynne Robinson uses archetypal characteristics of Western mythology to deconstruct not only mythical identities from American myth but also larger notions of the family unit and the role of the mother. In fact, in regard to its exploration of identity, *Housekeeping* is more successful than *The Virgin Suicides* in deconstructing identity. Whereas suicide is the only way for the Lisbon sisters to escape the mythical narrative created by the male narrators, Ruth narrates her own story in *Housekeeping*, and both Ruth and Sylvie escape Fingerbone without having to die. This represents a radical divergence from traditional narratives of female development, in which death is often the traditional ending for female characters who choose not to subscribe to a traditional feminine identity; as Elizabeth Abel argues, subversive women in traditional novels of female development “are perceived as unnatural and pay the price of unhappiness, if not madness or death” (228-9). Hence, though Maureen Ryan argues that “Marilynne Robinson writes beyond the ending of the archetypal story of the American Adam,” I have demonstrated that in both *The Virgin Suicides* and

Housekeeping Eugenides and Robinson choose to also write beyond the American Eve. Both these novels present female characters who either choose death as an alternative to a mythical existence, in the case of the Lisbon sisters, or who actually escape a mythical narrative without needing to die in the attempt. Hence, they are significant novels that fundamentally deconstruct the myth of the American Adam, and also reject such a mythical paradigm for female characters in literature.

The Adamic myth, though, remains a convincing framework for American novelists. Indeed, Alicia Ostriker argues that “the need for a myth of some sort may be ineradicable” (316), especially considering that scholars from R. W. B. Lewis onwards have frequently described works of American literature as operating within a mythical framework. However, for feminist critics, a greater focus should be placed on female characters that reject this mythical framework, and offer identities that problematize the construction of a universal myth of femininity, as in *The Virgin Suicides* and *Housekeeping*.

Appendix



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

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