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Feminine Critique and Domestic Mystique:
Representations of the Home in Elizabeth Madox
Roberts

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FEMININE CRITIQUE AND DOMESTIC MYSTIQUE: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE
HOME IN ELIZABETH MADOX ROBERTS

by

LYNDSEY BROWN

(Under the Direction of Olivia Carr Edenfield)

ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Madox Roberts, once considered one of the most important authors of the early twentieth century, has suffered critical neglect since her death in 1941. Though Robert Penn Warren wrote an important essay calling for her recovery in 1963, the political and social environment of the 1960s, including the advent of second-wave feminism, contributed, in part, to the continued neglect of Roberts's work. Roberts's texts do not actively protest social or economic injustice; instead, they focus on the internalized lives of her protagonists. This internalization is seen in Roberts's complex portrayal of the home and domesticity. This paper analyzes the ways in which the home in Roberts's novels functions as a space for a woman's internalizations, and also explores how Roberts's representations of the home and domesticity did not fit the political or social agendas of the 1960s and 70s when Robert Penn Warren called for renewed interest in her work.

INDEX WORDS: Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Second-wave feminism, Home, House, Domesticity, Domestic space, Recovery, Internalization, Soul, *Black is My Truelove's Hair*, *The Time of Man*, *My Heart and My Flesh*

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HOME IN ELIZABETH MADDOX ROBERTS

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DEDICATION

To Jenny

For being a fellow traveler, editor, and friend along the journey.

And to the “housewives who like to read.”

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	6
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	8
2 <i>MY HEART AND MY FLESH: A DEEP AND DANGEROUS SPACE</i>	20
3 <i>THE TIME OF MAN: ELLEN'S TRUNK AND THE ABSENCE OF A HOME</i>	31
4 <i>BLACK IS MY TRUE LOVE'S HAIR: HOME AS A SAFE HAVEN</i>	38
5 CONCLUSION: "LIFE IS FROM WITHIN".....	56
NOTES.....	62
WORKS CITED.....	64

Introduction

When Elizabeth Madox Roberts's first novel, *The Time of Man*, was released in 1926, it was hailed by critics and contemporary readers alike. *The New York Times* called Roberts's premiere novel "a fine piece of work" and a "poignant chronicle of American peasantry" (Stuart), and *New York World* raved that *The Time of Man* marked "the coming of a stylist whose pen is dipped in beauty." Roberts's novel even garnered attention from British critics like Ford Madox Ford, who called *The Time of Man* "the most beautiful individual piece of writing that has yet to come out of America" (qtd. in McDowell 26). The novel sold well and was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and within a few short years, Roberts had added six novels, two books of poetry, and two collections of short stories to her name and was considered one of the leading American writers. Her commercial success, coupled with the praise of various admirers, such as Sherwood Anderson, Louis Untermeyer, Conrad Aiken, Edward Garnett, Donald Adams, Glenway Wescott and Robert Morss Lovett, helped to cement Roberts as one of the most important and prolific American writers of the early twentieth century.

Yet by the time of her death in 1941, Roberts had already outlived her popularity and acclaim. As Roberts's physical and mental health began to decline in the mid 1930s, her productivity remained constant but the critical response to her work became more erratic. *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh* had helped to cement Roberts as a well-known and highly respected author, but her third novel, a satire entitled *Jingling in the Wind*, met with cool reception from critics (McDowell 26). Roberts's literary career experienced a revival with the publication of *The Great Meadow* in 1930 and *A Buried Treasure* in 1931, but her 1935 novel, *He Sent Forth a*

Raven, was particularly damaging to her literary career. The story, which chronicles the life of a daughter and her bitter father who, after the death of his wife, vows to never step foot on the earth again and willingly exiles himself from mankind, was received poorly by most critics and readers. As a result, as Frederick P.W. McDowell notes, after the publication of *He Sent Forth a Raven*, “Miss Roberts’s reputation with the general public declined sharply” (27).

Not all had abandoned Roberts, however. Almost thirty years later, in 1963, Robert Penn Warren published an essay in the *Saturday Review* asserting the need to revive Roberts’s reputation and to “recover” her from literary obscurity and the “agenda” and “distortions” of the 1930s (12-13). In his essay, Warren questions that if *The Time of Man* was truly the great work he believed it to be, “how did it happen to disappear so soon, almost without a bubble to mark the spot?” (11). Noting that there is, of course, a “natural history of literary reputation,” Warren also contends that *The Time of Man* fell from popular favor in the 1930s because it did not present the “urgent need to change the social and economic environment” of the time (12). As evidence of this literary environment, Warren cites the fact that critic David Daiches could reject an author like Joseph Conrad on the ground that “he does not concern himself at all with the economic and social background underlying human relationships” (11). Warren adds that any literature that was concerned with “an inward victory, [was] taken as subtle propaganda against any effort directed toward [social] outward victory” (12), and that a variety of others, including William Faulkner, were literary victims of this economic agenda. In this context, Roberts’s work did not fulfill the agenda of social change with which many critics were concerned during the Depression. Despite Warren’s efforts and those of a

handful of other critics,¹ the words from his 1963 essay still ring true: “The youth of today do not even know her name” (5).

Though Warren’s argument regarding the social agenda of the 1930s helps to explain a portion of Roberts’s literary decline, it does not account for why his own efforts in the 60s were largely ignored. Warren himself was one of the most influential figures of the Southern Renaissance. A two-time Pulitzer Prize winner and a founding editor of the important literary magazine *The Southern Review*, Warren was a mentor to authors such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O’Connor, and Harper Lee; however, despite his profound influence, Warren’s call for renewed recognition of Roberts’s work was met with indifference and little response. It is necessary, then, to examine other factors that may have contributed to the neglect of Roberts’s work in order to establish a case for her recovery.

Notably, Warren’s essay was published in 1963, the same year generally ascribed to the advent of second-wave feminism.² When Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, her work ushered in a new age of feminism, and, consequently, of literary criticism. Friedan argued that women were defined only in relationship to men and were, therefore, unable to define themselves by their own actions within the larger place of society. Reflecting back on the social climate surrounding the publication of her book, Friedan observes, “There was no ‘woman’s vote’; women voted as their husbands did. No pollster of political candidate talked about ‘women’s issues’; women were not taken that seriously, women didn’t take themselves that seriously” (xv). In light of this patriarchal dependence, Friedan posits that women could not ultimately find fulfillment in the home because there remained a voice inside

every woman that said, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (32). If the home is incapable of providing fulfillment for women, the “Feminine Mystique,” Friedan asserts, is the hollow, yet glorified role of the mother and housewife presented by a patriarchal culture that seeks to confine women to the home.

Friedan’s text was both groundbreaking and highly influential. In a review of two new biographies of Friedan for *The New York Times*, Judith Shulevitz argues that *The Feminine Mystique* “changed the world so comprehensively that it’s hard to remember how much change was called for.” Consequently, women’s literary texts that were recovered around this time share a similar theme of the rejection of the home on the grounds that the home is a patriarchal construct. Moreover, the rise of feminist literary theory began around the same time as Friedan’s text, with the publication of important and provocative works such as Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* in 1969 and Elaine Showalter’s “Towards a Feminist Poetics” in 1979. The groundbreaking work of feminist critics in the 60s and 70s was vital in forming a “female literary tradition,”³ and feminist publishing companies began reprinting lost “classics” and out-of-print women’s writings. In 1973, for example, The Feminist Press published stories from writers such as Rebecca Harding Davis and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. In London, the publishing house Virago was instrumental in republishing the works of women writers such as Antonia White, Rosamond Lehmann and Djuna Barnes (Eagleton 108-9). And other important literary venues, such as books shops, conferences, and reading groups, all flourished under the influence of the feminist publishing companies and the new criticism.

The important writings of the feminist critics in the 1960s and 70s were also aimed at political change. In an essay chronicling the many key changes of feminist

literary criticism, entitled, “A History of Women’s Writing,” Helen Carr notes that second-wave feminism came “out of a period of social protest, and the women’s movement was modeled on and aligned with other campaigning groups in the sixties” (121). Indeed, Susan Sellers and Gill Plain echo the emphasis of the political, adding that “‘second-wave’ feminism emerged in the aftermath of, and in conjunction with, a number of radical political movements. For many women – writers, critics, activists – the personal became the political” (102).

The focus of many of these feminist concerns is reflected in the title of Eva Figes’s influential 1970 text, *Patriarchal Attitudes*. As Carr adds, one of the most striking characteristics of the early feminist literary critics was that they were “almost solely concerned with men” (120). Issues of misogyny and patriarchy were at the forefront of the literary discussion of the feminists, and Carr argues that “the sixties were a decade in which traditional hierarchies were being challenged on a wide front: attitudes to class, race, social authority and colonial dominance were all subject to critique and re-examination” (122). As Mary Eagleton notes in her essay “Literary Representations of Women,” key feminist critics, such as Figes, believed that the only way for women to free their voices from the patriarchal system was to “cut through a long history of laws, precepts, ideologies, institutional and cultural practices – all...created and sustained by men. Only when this excrescence is cleared away will the ground be set for women to reveal their full potential” (106). Much of the early work of feminist critics, then, was concerned with patriarchal attitudes, sensitive to a cultural misogyny and aimed at political change. Notably, prolific figures like Millet believed that this change was largely linked to literature, as writing was a key location for important conversations and a

venue for questions and debates centered on what became known as “sexual politics.” Literary criticism was, in many ways, at the forefront of this political movement. As Eagleton notes, Millett and many others agreed that “women’s liberation was going to come, in some measure, through the analysis of literature” (106). Political and social climates, then, remain central to a conversation regarding the recovery of women’s writings during the time of second-wave feminism.

Though much was being recovered and reprinted, the polemical nature of the movement often meant that the works that were restored rejected the patriarchal system in a way that brought about and reflected immediate social change. The works of Kate Chopin are an example of this type of recovery. Her controversial novel, *The Awakening*, in which the female protagonist drowns herself in order to be free from her domestic life, is often regarded as one of the most celebrated and influential texts of the feminist movement and of the literary canon as a whole. Yet Chopin’s lesser-known short story, “Athenaise,” which features a rebellious young wife who abandons her husband to pursue a life of her own, only to discover at the story’s end the joys of motherhood and marriage and thus decides to return to her husband, is rarely anthologized or celebrated. The issue, then, is not that women’s texts were not being recovered around the time and in the years that followed Warren’s essay; the issue is that the recovered texts often represented a very particular definition of feminism and womanhood – one that rejected the home and domestic space in favor of personal independence and freedom from male oppression.

It is not my desire to undermine or to criticize the many noteworthy accomplishments that were born as a result of the feminist critics in the 1960s and 70s.

Indeed, feminism and feminist critics have played one of the most vital and enriching roles in the development of a modern literary canon. Carr notes that second-wave feminism continued to develop in the 1980s and that feminist literary criticism “became more diverse, more sophisticated and more wide-ranging” (131). Additionally, more recent works such as Ann Romines’s *Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual* (1992) underscore the importance of homemaking and domesticity in American fiction. However, an approach to gender that rejects the place of the home in a woman’s life and describes it predominantly as a limiting and restrictive space has a direct influence on which women’s texts are canonized. The home, after all, was the primary place of creativity and productivity for women for centuries. In this way, to reject the home is essentially to reject the stories of women for thousands of years. An analysis of Roberts’s representation of the home, then, is necessary to understand both Roberts’s unique portrayal of the lives of southern women during the early twentieth century, and also explains a possible reason for Roberts’s literary decline and the resistance to her revival in the 1960s.

While certain feminist texts argued that the patriarchal system must be destroyed, torn down, and rebuilt in order for women’s stories to be truly heard, in contrast, Roberts skillfully portrays a female strength and victory that does not work directly against the patriarchal system, but finds a way to thrive, subvert, and live *within* the system. This is not to say that Roberts does not criticize the unfair and unjust social and political systems in her novels, but she does so subtly, opting instead to move her characters’ internalized lives to the forefront of her novels and to focus on strengths and victories that supersede traditional social boundaries.

Ultimately, for Roberts's protagonists, personal change often unfolds within the home. Roberts's portrayal of the home and femininity is complex and multilayered. Her texts are uniquely feminine and her subject matter deals almost exclusively with women's issues and struggles. The protagonists in Roberts's stories are generally uneducated, financially poor women who are dependent on those around them.⁴ These women express desires for typically traditional things: love, marriage, children, and a stable home life. Yet far from banal or conventional, Roberts's protagonists possess a strength of character and a beauty of mind, and in the words of Roberts's biographer, Jane Eblen Keller, they typically rescue themselves from dire and emotionally difficult situations "entirely by their minds -- not necessarily from 'book learnin'" but from a process that includes reasoning, logic, analysis, determination, courage, and other such things often characterized as 'masculine.'" ("interview"). Though typically poor and uneducated, the protagonists in Roberts's stories are captivating in their courage and inspiring in their often poetic and artistic view of the world, and, as Keller adds, "in their ambition to find self-knowledge, equilibrium, and a measure of autonomy" ("interview"). Indeed, the lives of these women and their responses to various events around them dominate the focus of Roberts's novels. Her style is Modernist, as Keller notes, in the intellectual framework of Ezra Pound and *Poetry* magazine ("Stuck in Springfield" 3), incorporating stream-of-consciousness writing and feelings of fragmentation, at the same time that it is decidedly Romantic: nature is vital to nearly every one of these women, and Roberts's lofty prose often reflects high adoration, verging on spirituality, for the natural world in the lives of these characters.

Roberts's novels are not action or plot driven, but are complicated

representations of the minds and inner-workings of Kentucky women struggling to make sense of the world around them. Consequently, each of these women is on a journey of sorts, and though this odyssey is often represented literally in the form of travel and roads, their true odysseys, and ultimately what drives the heart of the novels, are the journeys of the self.

It is not surprising that Roberts would choose to focus on an existential journey in the lives of her characters. Indeed, Roberts herself declared that a woman's journey through life was internalized to a greater degree and experienced more deeply than that of a man. In her preparatory notes for *The Time of Man*, she wrote:

There is so much more to a woman than there is to a man. More complication. A woman is more closely identified with the earth, more real because deeper gifted with pain, danger and a briefer life. More intense, richer in memory and feeling. A man's machinery is all outside himself. A woman's is deeply and dangerously inside. (qtd. in McDowell 156)

Whereas men worked outside the home and were permitted to own land or allowed the opportunity for commercial or social success, a woman's life often unfolded within and revolved around the home. Without autonomy or the same social or economic rights as men, women were limited in their impact on and interactions with the outside world. In this way, their voices and stories were largely internalized not only within the home, but also within their souls and minds.

Roberts's own life reflected the difficulties inherent in this type of internalization. Suffering from poor health and symptoms of a mental breakdown, Roberts was treated at the Riggs Foundation in Massachusetts from December 1923 to May 1924 for what

have been euphemistically called “recurring headaches.” According to Keller, Roberts suffered a nervous breakdown, likely with suicidal elements, in 1922, and experienced “at least two very serious episodes of something like neuropsychotic breaks in the mid 1930s.” Keller adds that Roberts’s “very real and very terrible migraines were probably related in some way to her ‘psychoneuroses’” (“interview”). McDowell argues that Roberts’s constant illness and mental struggles help to explain a portion of the “abnormally tense lives of her heroines with whom she so completely identified herself” (26).

Undoubtedly, this deep and dangerous internalization that Roberts herself experienced is a core theme within her novels. How these women respond to various life-changing events results in something that is deep, mysterious, even poetic, yet equally dangerous. In *The Time of Man*, for example, Ellen Chesser searches for some semblance of a meaningful identity in the midst of great tragedy and limited resources, and seeks to understand what it really means to be alive. However, when her desires for love, marriage, and stability are essentially thwarted, she experiences a dark night of the soul that nearly leads to a suicide. By the novel’s end, however, Ellen resolves to follow her husband when he is driven out of town, and the story closes with a final image of Ellen, with her family, traveling down a road towards a new life. Additionally, In *My Heart and My Flesh*, Theodosia suffers the loss of nearly every element of her life she holds dear, including her family, her music, and ultimately her health. After she is forced to live with her aunt in a dilapidated home that threatens her life, Theodosia must find the inner strength to leave her dangerous physical surroundings, and also the courage to return, embrace, and rebuild what remains of her former life. Finally, Dena,

in *Black is My Truelove's Hair*, must return to her hometown, ashamed and disgraced, after eloping with a man who physically abuses her and whom she later discovers has no intentions of marrying her. Her shame, coupled with her fear that the man will return to kill her, causes Dena to repress her emotions and her past. It is only after she confronts that which she fears most that she is able to reconstruct her identity and engage in meaningful relationships, both personally and socially.

Perhaps the best example of this “deep” and “dangerous” internalization in a woman’s life is seen in Roberts’s complex portrayal of the home. In her book *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*, Marilyn R. Chandler notes that “American writers have generally portrayed the structures an individual inhabits as bearing a direct relationship or resemblance to the structure of his or her psyche and inner life” (10). Gaston Bachelard adds to this notion in *The Poetics of Space*, arguing that the house reveals “a psychic state” (72) and reinforces the idea of the soul as “an abode. And by remembering ‘houses’ and ‘rooms’ we learn to ‘abide’ within ourselves” (xxxvii). Roberts’s representation of the home echoes these sentiments of the home as an object linked with one’s identity or psychic state, but also presents the home as a predominantly feminine space that encases a woman’s identity and deepest longings or fears – a space for her internalizations.

In her personal journals, Roberts wrote of a space that exists between the outer world and the inner mind:

Somewhere there is a connection between the world of the mind and the outer order – it is the secret of the contact that we are after, the point, the moment of union. We faintly sense the one and we know as faintly, but

there is a point where they come together, and we can never know the whole reality until we have these two complete. (qtd. in Warren 13)

The Time of Man, My Heart and My Flesh, and Black is My Truelove's Hair

brilliantly reflect and confine these sentiments to a single space: the home. For these reasons, Roberts's representation of the home merits attention, not only as an important motif within her work, but also as a possible stumbling block and area of contention for a modern audience and a modern canon. A deeper analysis of this space is necessary as it suggests a more "whole reality," but also reveals the value of a beautiful and threatening space that exists "deeply and dangerously inside."

My Heart and My Flesh: A Deep and Dangerous Space

Roberts's representation of the home in *My Heart and My Flesh* is equally powerful as it is disturbing. After the loss of essentially all things necessary to live, including shelter, money, and mental wellbeing, the novel's protagonist, Theodosia, is forced to take up residency with her miserly aunt of the same name. It is Aunt Doe's house that dominates the climactic end of the novel. The home is presented as powerful and dangerous, seemingly able to kill Theodosia both physically and mentally. The home becomes so dangerous, in fact, that it ultimately moves beyond a simple prison archetype to a form of hell, complete with death, decay, foul odors, and "demon" dogs. The house is dreadful, and seems to fit the 1960s feminist concept of domestic life as a hollow and limiting space. Yet where Roberts differs is that she attributes the demise of the home to a harmful maternal presence, not to an inherent or intrinsic evil associated with the home. Indeed, it is Aunt Doe and her miserliness and apathy that transform the domestic sphere from the warm and pleasant environment Theodosia remembers from her youth to the dangerous and repellent force it becomes by the novel's end.

Theodosia first visits her aunt's home with her sister and grandfather when she is a child. When Theodosia initially stays at the house, her experience is one of child-like joy and thrilling exploration, and the language surrounding her experience is vivid and welcoming: the wall leading to the house is described as "rich" with moss, and "pines, lindens, locusts, tulip poplars and elms" grow about the house in "pleasant confusion" (36). Additionally, Prudie, "the negro girl" who cooks for the family, works to create meals that are rich in "flour, sugar...or cuts of ham" (36). Theodosia and her sister, Annie, roam about the open lands, taking in "each new wonder," and Theodosia's uncle,

Tom Singleton, is particularly kind to her, affectionately calling her “Ladybug” and offering her additional food at the table. A benevolent figure, Tom Singleton joyfully strives to fulfill the “office of host,” and Theodosia’s grandfather graciously responds and meets his concern with “joy” (39).

In contrast, Doe Singleton’s presence in the home is immediately marked as antagonistic, exuding a hostility that is, nevertheless, unable to “reduce” the joy experienced by the other parties. Not completely without manners, Doe Singleton ceremoniously welcomes her guests, kissing each little girl “as was her duty” (35), and carefully shrouds her general disdain under her “function as hostess” (36). Though a child, Theodosia is easily able to detect the bitter spirit that surrounds her aunt and finds her hostile behavior confusing: “Her joy in the farm and her pain in her aunt could not interfuse” (41). Theodosia’s conflicting sentiments towards her aunt’s behavior are seen clearly when she sits with her aunt, uncle, and father at dinner. After listening to Doe Singleton’s caustic responses to her uncle and grandfather’s discussions about dogs and magistrates, Theodosia feels that the very air around her is capable of splitting “asunder with a great crash, the flaw centering in her aunt’s hands and extending two ways across the solid of the room” (42). This notion of her aunt as god-like demonstrates both Theodosia’s fear of her aunt and her awareness that her aunt has unmistakable power, able even to control the world around her.

Whereas many of Theodosia’s childhood memories of the home of Doe and Tom Singleton are marked with joy, Theodosia returns to the Singleton home no longer a girl, but a woman who has faced a barrage of painful and tragic circumstances. After suffering the death of nearly every living family member, with the exception of her

licentious father, and the rejection of the suitor of her choice and the death of another, Theodosia finds herself on the verge of a physical and mental breakdown. The final weight that pushes Theodosia over the edge arises from her indirect involvement in a murder committed by her mulatto half-sister. Suffering from psychological trauma and finding herself without any remaining family members to support or sustain her, Theodosia is forced to recover at the home of her only nearby, remaining relative: her aunt.

Doe Singleton is a mean-spirited and miserly woman whose house essentially becomes a living hell in the final drama of the novel. The joy Theodosia experienced as a child in the presence of the farm is radically transformed during her second stay. Theodosia finds herself in the same house she visited as a child, yet with the loss of her uncle and the condition of the home left entirely to Doe Singleton, the house begins to resemble the same hostile and bitter spirit as its hostess. From the outset, the home under Doe Singleton's care is depicted as vile and unwelcoming. The rooms are cold, as the old woman does not like to "waste the wood," and the kitchen is filled with "stale cobwebs" and the sickening "odors of mice" and "mould" (212-13). Even the room Theodosia chooses to stay in, the same one she shared with Annie as a child, is described as "unpleasant," with the bed receding into "diminished perceptions" and bulging with "apprehended" and "divided proportions" (203). And though the same linden trees remain outside the home, Theodosia is essentially unaware of them in the strange presence of her aunt, who is "subtracted from the content of the walls, length, breadth, and thickness," and moves about with "muffled" and "uncertain noises" (203). Mentally exhausted and physically weak, Theodosia is unable to enjoy the paths she

once traveled in her youth with Annie, and, instead, is forced to walk “down each avenue, step by step, stopping to look at each minute occurrence” solely in her mind (204). Though she is confined physically, Theodosia attempts to keep her thoughts active, and her mental exercises signal that she is still capable of imaginative activities and longs for mental stimulation within the oppressive walls of the home.

Gone also is the food that once flowed abundantly under the busy hands of the former cook, Prudie. Doe Singleton serves only the most meager of items: coffee, sugar, bread, and crackers. As if to heighten the miserliness of Doe Singleton’s choices, the peddler who delivers the food to the home constantly reminds the hostess of the bounty of his truck: extracts, flavors, perfumery, cake color, ice cream powders, and sage are all offered to Aunt Doe. Yet she declines in favor of coffee and sugar only (207). Though Doe Singleton’s miserliness and extreme frugality are not dangerous at first, the unkempt home eventually becomes morbid and unbearable. When Old True, one of the dogs that roams the house, dies in the upper hallway, his stiffened body is left until a tenant man comes to drag him away. Regardless of the removal of the dog’s corpse, “the strong sour odor of death pervade[s] the hallway for many days after,” and Theodosia is left alone upstairs with the stench (209).

While the inside of the home is filled with “cobwebs and dust” (215), Doe Singleton’s neglect eventually leads to the deterioration of the outside of the house as well. When the rains begin, the heavy waters wet the ceiling in Theodosia’s room and the constant drip forces the ill Theodosia to move to another room. After informing her aunt that “the roof upstairs leaks everywhere” and suggesting the roof be mended because there “is hardly a dry place left,” Doe Singleton merely acts as if her niece has

said nothing, adding only, "Want more bread?" (210). The neglect Doe Singleton exhibits towards her house as well as the physical condition of her niece becomes increasingly more dangerous as Theodosia's health worsens. Often cold and living off a diet of only a small serving of bread and a few crackers, Theodosia begins to think she will not survive much longer in the house and begins to desire even the food that is fed to the dogs, who in many cases seem to eat better than she does. While her home is filled with cobwebs, dust, and dead animals, Theodosia's aunt is content to sit all day reading books – the same books "she had read in her youth and had reread many times since" (212). Her refusal to remain involved in the real world around her and her decision, instead, to retreat into an imaginary world underscores the ways in which Doe Singleton is completely unavailable to her niece and unwilling to engage in life around her, even if it requires turning a blind eye to Theodosia's impending death.

The dilapidated home and the power it has over the life of Theodosia illustrate how the internalization of a woman's life can manifest itself in dreadful and harmful ways. At the hands of a perverse and anti-maternal woman, the home holds the power to destroy. Though Doe Singleton's internalizations are dark and hostile, and her home, therefore, exhibits these same characteristics, the house is, without a doubt, the most prominent and powerful location of any in the story. Its presence is central in the life of Theodosia as it not only reflects her aunt's insidious spirit, but accurately portrays Theodosia's own emotional and physical decline from the pleasant and joyful time of her youth to the dark and deathly circumstances she finds herself near the novel's end.

As the pivotal location in *My Heart and My Flesh*, Doe Singleton's home is where Theodosia's dark night of the soul manifests and grows until she begins to plan her own

suicide. Roberts's ideas regarding the "deep and dangerous" life of women are seen clearly in Theodosia's personal journey and are ultimately magnified in the house of her aunt. From the beginning, *My Heart and My Flesh* is a story that deals with issues that are both deep and unseen. In her personal notes, Roberts wrote that she saw Theodosia as "man looking inly upon the wonders of his inner part, pushing his gaze deeper and deeper as the matter there parts and yields to his look" (qtd. in McDowell 115). It is this isolation and, in part, deep introspection that define and construct the gradual descent of the life of Theodosia, culminating within the physical constructs of the dilapidated house of her aunt, and set the stage for the wonder and strength of the human spirit to emerge and triumph.

As McDowell notes, *My Heart and My Flesh* is a story centered on descent and is concerned more with subtraction than addition. Whereas Ellen's journey in *The Time of Man* centers on a woman who starts with nothing and eventually "all things are slowly but steadily given," Theodosia journey is one where "all things are taken away" (107). Roberts herself described the purpose of the story as a way to "isolate a human spirit, to separate it from circumstances, to find it beyond the influence of fortune, to part and lay back and away everything that can be set aside, life remaining" (qtd. in McDowell 108). Roberts notes that the intent of this subtraction was to strip away all aspects of life until there was nothing left "but the bare breath of the throat and the simplified spirit" (qtd. in 107). In this way, Theodosia's life must become destitute of all self-actualization and external support, both material and emotional, in order for the "wonder" of Theodosia's inner strength to be brought to the forefront of the story.

Indeed, this stripping away and emphasis on the inner parts is presented as a recurring theme early on in the novel. In the opening chapter, the story unfolds through the eyes of a young girl named Luce. Luce is the same age of Theodosia and both are to be in a pageant at church where Theodosia's mother, Charlotte Bell, plays the piano. As Luce recalls the various details of Charlotte Bell's life, she mentally dissects her outward appearance in a search of sorts and in a desire to "lay her bare":

She tore away the clothes from around her shoulders and opened her body. She emptied the heart out of it and flung out the entrails...She went searching down through blood and veins, liver and lights, smelt and kidney. Out came the fat, the guts, the ribs. She was looking for something" (7). As Luce continues her search past the "brains" and "skull bones," she concludes there was "nothing found, nothing left," and "quickly [reassembles] Miss Charlotte" (8). Luce, a character who does not return throughout the rest of the novel, and her desire to see Charlotte Bell for what truly makes up her existence, represents the human desire to search past the outward appearance of things for something of greater significance. Though Luce finds "nothing," she notes that Miss Charlotte nevertheless "suggested something within, hinted of it with her turning mouth and with the slight movement of her limbs under her pretty dress" and "gave a brief warning of it in the way the lace was sewed into the dress and the way the two large pins were placed to hold up her hair" (8). Luce cannot find the significance she is searching for within the "brains" and "skull" and "veins" of Charlotte Bell, but she senses "something within," something Theodosia will later search for in the lives of others around her and in herself: a soul.

The idea and importance of the soul is preeminent in *My Heart and My Flesh*. It is what Luce looks for when trying to understand the people around her, and it is the same thing Theodosia repeatedly returns to as she seeks to make sense of her complicated relationships. As Theodosia struggles to assign a fitting and acceptable role to her mulatto half-siblings, she expresses a desire to see the “roots of [their] life and [their] being” (132) and to find an answer to the question of their “flesh to flesh” connection (145). Likewise, it is the soul that Theodosia recognizes when she feels joy in her life over her friendships and prospective love interests, Albert and Conway, as the thought of them brings “a smile to her lips,” causing her audibly to announce, “This is my spirit, my soul. It’s here...this unit. I can almost touch it with my words” (116). Moreover, when Theodosia seeks to understand the source of her musical creation, she remembers that “music must come out of the spirit, the soul,” and one question arises “again and again. The soul, where and what was it?” (87). And while the glory and mystery of the soul is hinted at throughout the novel, it is only in Theodosia’s great tribulation that the strength and endurance of the soul is truly tried.

As Theodosia’s circumstances within the home of her aunt become direr and her emotional state more erratic, she is no longer in control of any external circumstances. Even her one outside influence, Frank, her lone remaining friend and hopeful lover who continues to visit her weekly, has abandoned her on all practical levels. Desperate to survive, Theodosia pleads with “broken breath” for Frank to rescue her: “I’m so hungry. I’m hungry. I never have enough. I’m hungry...I never have real food. I’ll starve” (226). But Frank blindly chooses to believe that all will be well for Theodosia and offers only the warmth of his caresses and a kiss on his departure.

Abandoned and unable to make even the most basic choices for her life, such as what she will eat, Theodosia is left with only one real decision – whether she will choose to live or die. Preoccupied with the latter, Theodosia's mental state worsens, and she begins to hear voices in her head. From the voices, Theodosia comes to the haunting conclusion, "Oh, God, I believe, and there's nothing to believe" (247), and begins plotting to drown herself in the pond outside her aunt's home:

She thought again and again of the pond below hill in the creek bottom. The water would be fresh and sweet after the long winter rains and it would stand high along the banks. In the morning someone would find her body there, water-soaked, lying in the clean mud at the bottom of the water, stones tied to her feet. It would be easy to go out the door some night and never come back. (247)

Theodosia, in her weakened state, decides that there can be no other escape from the toxic environment of her aunt's home and the weight of past experiences except through death itself. Her fixation on her suicide leads to further frenzied behavior, and Theodosia informs Frank that she will never see him again, resigning herself to her room where she continually hisses at Tilly, one of her aunt's dogs (253). Theodosia decides that she will end her life in one "sudden spasm of movement" when she will spring for the door and rush out and be gone (255). Yet in what seems like an abrupt and inexplicable change of events, rather than drown herself, Theodosia is suddenly gripped by a "vivid appearance" that is so "brilliant and powerful," her consciousness is "abashed" (255). She becomes obsessed with one word that pervades her entire being and catches in her "throat with a deep sob" (256). The sudden hope, which Theodosia

sees as a “new flower in a sunny place,” arises from the word “tomorrow” (256). With her consciousness latched to some nebulous longing and new hope for the future, Theodosia rushes to hang a white cloth on a pillar outside the home to signal to the peddler to stop at the house along his route. Able to convince him to give her a ride to another town, Theodosia seizes an opportunity for escape and within minutes is outside the dominion of her aunt and her treacherous home, and, instead, on a journey towards a new life, a tomorrow seen symbolically in the open countryside that unfolds before Theodosia as she travels towards “Spring Run Valley,” a name which no doubt speaks of the potential for new beginnings.

Theodosia’s transformation and subsequent uncontested departure from the house of her aunt is both sudden and puzzling. Indeed, Theodosia’s abrupt exit coupled with the limited narrative commentary on what prompted such a massive change may initially appear as poor plot development on the part of Roberts: there is no obvious epiphany that accompanies Theodosia’s sudden decision, nor is there an outside savior or divine circumstance that frees Theodosia from the hell-like habitat of her aunt. Yet Theodosia’s desire to live, and the lack of related events surrounding that decision, highlights the fact that Theodosia’s momentous choice was not entirely one of the mind nor one aided by outside influences. It was, instead, a reflection and representation of the strength and glory that existed within Theodosia’s soul. As Roberts herself noted, Theodosia’s final triumph mirrors a type of resurrection: “out of the icy waters of the frozen pond...spirit asserted itself over the necessities of death” (qtd. in McDowell 108). Without outside help or even mental stability, Theodosia’s spirit wills her to live and provides her with the strength necessary to escape the clutches of impending physical

and mental annihilation by forcing her focus beyond what can be seen, the dire present, to the hope of an unseen future, a tomorrow that only the living can hope for.

The obvious lack of mental stability and clarity surrounding Theodosia's life-saving decision, even in the midst of complete isolation, underscores the supreme power and strength of the soul and aptly illustrates what Roberts referred to as the "life remaining." In the same way that Theodosia's soul experiences radical change, so, too, the home of Doe Singleton undergoes a similar transformation. As Theodosia's life slowly falls apart and all comforts are steadily stripped away, she finds herself trapped in a home subject to the same type of destruction. Both the physical constructs of the home and the hidden soul of Theodosia suffer under the indifference of the cold and disillusioned Doe Singleton. Yet Theodosia's exit from her aunt's home demonstrates the insurmountable power and hope that remain in the human soul even against the harshest physical and emotional elements. The multilayered nature of the home is the perfect backdrop for Theodosia's sudden, internal, and quiet victory – a victory that gently champions the supreme power of the human spirit.

The Time of Man: Ellen's Trunk and the Absence of a Home

In *The Time of Man*, Roberts delicately unfolds the mind and inner-workings of the story's young protagonist, Ellen Chesser, as she develops and matures into adulthood. The novel takes place over a twenty-year period and follows Ellen's life as a poor tenant farmer to an adult wife and mother of five children. Given her poor social status and the nature of her father's job, Ellen's life is one of constant motion. Even the narrative structure of the novel depicts this truth. From the opening scene of Ellen as a young girl traveling with her father for his work, to the novel's final scene when she resolves to follow her husband wherever he goes, Ellen's story ultimately begins and ends with a journey.

Given the story's title, it is easy to view Ellen as an "everyman." Indeed, many of her experiences, including change, maturity, and personal loss, are universal and can stand as a representation for all mankind. Yet Ellen's journey is also uniquely feminine. As Wendy Pearce Miller states, "Ellen might not be an everyman figure, but she is, arguably, everywoman" (121). In many ways, her life is determined by her role as a woman. Constante Gonzalez Groba further illustrates Ellen's defining position as a woman, noting that her life is "not the masculine journey of setting out and leading but the feminine one of following and going along for the ride" (50). Her role as a woman places her in a position of dependence on and subservience to the men around her. Functioning within a firm patriarchal system, Roberts underscores a woman's capacity for inner awareness and equips Ellen with the courage to endure the difficulties of life with a mind that seeks to make sense of the world around her.

Yet amid her passive journey, one where she is constantly forced to change houses, scenery and friendships, Ellen remains intent on establishing some type of agency and continually proclaims that she is indeed “here” (89). Her desire for a meaningful and definitive place in life echoes Ellen’s later desires for a home of her own. This need for a stable home is highlighted by Ellen’s early desire for her own personal space. When Ellen begins to show signs of maturation and the marks of womanhood begin to appear “on her meager body,” she experiences a change in her emotional and mental needs as well (47). Ellen longs for her own space, somewhere that belongs solely to her where she could “read a book by the window” by herself (47). Furthermore, Ellen wishes she had drawers to put things in, and “things to put in drawers” (47). This space Ellen longs for, which is hidden from the external eye, is no doubt a space meant to take the place of Ellen’s yearnings for a home. In this way, Ellen’s desire for a space to “put things in” represents the same internalization and defining feminine space seen in Roberts’s portrayal of the home. In many ways, Ellen’s “drawers” are simply a compact representation of the home, a space which speaks to the longings of her heart and the things most intimately associated with her identity. But Ellen’s chest, suggestive of a “hope chest”⁵ in which women collected various items to aid them in their transitions to married life, also provides a tangible picture for the items Ellen most closely links to her identity. Her secret space is not simply a chest to house her dreams and plans, but a space meant to define her as a woman, a space that represents the woman Ellen is becoming and the woman she hopes to be in the future.

Ellen’s dreams for personal space soon materialize and, for the first time, she is given a room of her own when her father takes a better paying job. Ellen also acquires a

“small wooden trunk” for her personal possessions, which she purchases from a peddler. Ellen uses her new space and independence to establish her identity and cultivate her inner awareness. Her room provides “the security to be within herself as if she were detached by the prison-like whiteness of the dry walls from her own memories, to begin her being anew” (240). Her desire to recreate herself, or, rather, the desire to separate her own identity from her memories, is highlighted by the confusing childhood sensations Ellen experiences when she is in her own room with her wooden chest. Notably, the trunk also has a key that allows it to be locked, and though Ellen is very much a woman and “her dress was a woman's dress” (241), she feels a child-like delight and a strong connection to childhood when she opens the trunk. When Ellen unlocks her trunk, she is often reminded of the “secret things and half-known” things of childhood and what “it was to be ten years old” (247). These conflicting emotions that accompany Ellen’s private and secret space speak of the complications and uncertainties associated with Ellen’s emerging identity. As she attempts to navigate her journey from childhood to womanhood, Ellen’s wooden trunk becomes symbolic for the hallowed physical elements that mark her quest for identity and signal her transition into womanhood.

Adding to the transcendent element of the chest is the fact that the only notable marking on all of Ellen's dull white walls is the shadow of where a clock once hung. With the clock now absent, the key to Ellen's trunk is kept on the same shelf “before the clock print” (241). In Ellen's personal sphere, her identity and the spiritual elements nearest to her heart are not bound by a physical place or time. Rather, her trunk is a symbolic space in which to keep the items most sacred on her quest. And though those items

have a physical nature, their significance bears an unseen and spiritual quality not bound in an earthly realm or by time.

Over the course of Ellen's journey towards womanhood, her chest is filled with several important items, all of which reflect back to the domestic longings for the home. When Jasper Kent and Ellen begin their romantic relationship, Jasper trusts Ellen with the money he has earned, which she locks in her trunk for safekeeping (251). For Ellen, Jasper's money represents hope for marriage and financial stability for their future, but it also represents Jasper's implicit trust and fidelity towards Ellen. He trusts her to be responsible for his earnings and, in some ways, ties their fates together.

As Ellen begins to develop more of a romantic interest in Jasper, she expresses her beauty by highlighting her femininity and piles “her hair in its soft rolls and [fastens] a small blue ribbon at her throat” (258). Locked in her chest above Jasper's money lay a “blue dress of thin muslin” (258). Indicative of Ellen's desires for womanhood and her budding romance with Jasper, she keeps a feminine clothing article locked in her chest. The dress lies on top of Jasper's money, indicating a type of hierarchy present in Ellen's mind – that money is needed in order for a stable romantic relationship to prosper. Likewise, Ellen's dress also speaks of the feminine nature of her identity. While she is still a poor farmer who must work in the fields “with the beasts and the plowed trenches,” (258) Ellen is also female, and with that identity comes a need for beauty and a desire to be noticed, particularly by Jasper.

Later, when Ellen and Jasper have married, the chest's further significance in Ellen's identity is illustrated by the small baby dress Ellen makes and hides in the trunk when she first discovers she is pregnant (313). And later, when Ellen learns she is

expecting more children, she sews a white-printed cloth that she also keeps hidden in the trunk for the new baby (315). This layering of Ellen's identity, as evidenced by the order of the items in the chest, represents Ellen's hierarchy of needs. Ellen first has a foundational need for money to ensure her physical well-being, followed by a need to express her femininity in her romantic relationships – even in the midst of poverty, and finally, Ellen desires to fulfill her role as a mother by providing for the needs of her children.

As Ellen's relationships as a wife and a mother develop, and Jasper is forced to take a new job in "another place" (326), Ellen longs for a stable home of her own. She pictures a place located "vaguely among trees, the consummation of some deeply lying dream, a house looking toward some wide valley...good land lying out smooth...a house fixed, the roof mended, a porch to sit on when the labor was done" (327). However, as Warren notes, "all this is a dream never to come quite true" (8). Without a home to provide her these basic foundational desires, Ellen supplements her need for personal space by way of her hope chest. Yet this chest nevertheless serves as a type of home – not one that physically surrounds, protects, and orients her, but as a home to Ellen's deepest desires. In this way, Ellen's chest is the physical manifestation of her feminine internalizations. This space is sacred and represents, in many ways, the state of Ellen's soul.

Though Ellen's spiritual journey and transition into womanhood take place over a twenty-year period, Ellen's quest for identity does not conclude at the end of the novel. After enduring various tragedies and hardships in her young life, Ellen and Jasper set off towards a new destination where "they asked no questions of the way but took their

own turnings,” indicating that Ellen’s quest for identity is never fully realized; rather, it is a journey Ellen must continue (395).

Some recent critics have argued that Ellen's story is not one of triumph or victory because there is no reason to believe that Ellen or Jasper's economic situation will improve and that “the cycle of poverty and deprivation will begin anew with Ellen's children ” (Miller 123). Constante Gonzalez Groba, for example, and Wendy Pearce Miller resist Roberts’s belief and intent that Ellen is an admirable force of resilience and creativity in a harsh world, concluding that a “strong deterministic vein” runs throughout the novel and that there is “not the faintest ray of hope for Ellen Chesser to ever break free from the constraints of her underprivileged social circle” (Miller 123). Miller adds that “we can hardly call survival on such terms a 'victory’” and that Ellen's life, “despite every effort to improve it, looks more like defeat” (123). However, Warren’s observations about the rejection of Roberts based on her lack of emphasis on social change is immensely important in this context. Critics who assign success or failure to Ellen’s life based on financial and economic factors miss the greater and more important point – that victory is hardly the point in the first place. Ellen’s story is about the journey, not the arrival.

Perhaps the most convincing argument for the triumphant nature of Ellen’s story is found in her final words to Jasper regarding his intent to leave. When Jasper tells Ellen that he plans to “go far” away and admonishes Ellen to remain with the children, Ellen’s response, “I’d go where you go and live where you live,” is a nearly verbatim rendering of the words of Ruth from the Old Testament (392). In the ancient Hebrew story, Ruth faced a comparable situation when her mother-in-law, Naomi, gave her

similar advice to return to her homeland. Ruth's response, "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay," (Ruth 1:16, New International Version) displays the similarities between the two women not only in their difficult circumstances, but in their choices to persevere and persist when given the option to essentially bow to the challenges of life and return home. Though Ruth's journey also included great tragedy and misfortune, her story ultimately ends with redemption at the hands of her husband, Boaz, as she not only becomes the grandmother of King David, but is also only one of five women counted among the lineage of Jesus Christ in Matthew's gospel. So while Ellen's circumstances may not portray immediate hope for economic prosperity, external circumstances and naturalistic forces are not the strongest elements at work in Ellen's life. Ellen's resilient spirit demonstrates that personal significance and triumph can still be found, even among the most obdurate physical and social obstacles, and that victory, like Ruth's redemption, often comes to those who refuse to give up and, instead, continue to persevere in the face of tragedy. Ellen's journey and her subsequent "success" as viewed through the lens of personal triumph reveal a woman transitioning from girlhood to womanhood while trying to make her place among all of mankind. Ellen's creed that she is indeed "here" suggests both a transcendent message of place and agency that reside above the physical realms and rules set in motion by society as well as a woman's need for personal space despite the myriad external factors working against this desire. Though Ellen relies on several physical elements, including her trunk, to commemorate her journey, Ellen's soul and mind are the most enduring elements of all, and her decision to embrace her life, no matter its packaging, is Ellen's true victory.

Black is My Truelove's Hair: Home as a Safe Haven

Black is My Truelove's Hair is perhaps the most cerebral of Roberts's novels, and, as McDowell notes, is "chiefly concerned with Dena Janes' psychic restoration" (80). Accordingly, issues of psychological repression and fragmentation are central to the story's development. The protagonist, Dena, must face the consequences of her brash behavior when she returns home from a "six-day sexual escapade with Will Langtry," one of the town's couriers (Rovit 117). However, after Langtry physically abuses her, Dena realizes she must return to her former life, even if it means accepting, as her sister is quick to remind her, that she is now a "ruined woman" (23). In this way, whereas Ellen and Theodosia eventually experience a dark night of the soul along their journeys, Dena's tale begins with one. Much of Dena's story, then, is that of a woman trying to come to terms with her past. These two conflicting forces, the past and the present, work symbolically to underscore the fragmentation that is prevalent throughout the novel. While Dena struggles to reconcile her former life with her new one, her sister Fronia's home provides a safe transition space between these fragmented identities, and the home, which her later fiancé, Cam, begins to build for her, serves as a tangible representation of her budding identity. Though Dena must eventually face her past, both literally and metaphorically, on her own, the home serves as a symbol of domestic safety and purpose, and provides a location for the healing necessary for Dena to create a new and meaningful identity.

The idea of fragmented identities, or a lack of identity, is introduced early on in the novel. Whereas Ellen Chesser in *The Time of Man* is immediately seen writing her name in the air – asserting her identity – *Black is My Truelove's Hair* begins with a

nameless figure, “a woman walking a narrow roadway in the hour of the dawn” (3). Though the woman is later identified as Dena Janes, the fact that her name is initially withheld underscores the importance of names and uncertainties about identity that define a greater part of Dena’s journey. After running off with Langtry for a total of eight days, Dena must walk the long road back to her sister’s home alone. Upon arriving, she explains to Fronia that Langtry has abused her, nearly choking her to death, and that she is afraid of the darkness she recognizes inside of him: “I saw his eyes open and black. They went inside, like a cave. Deep in there was a black nothing...I screamed out at what I saw” (24). Dena’s sister chastises her and warns her of the social implications of her decision, but Fronia nevertheless helps Dena clean herself from her long travels and offers both a stable home and a shelter from social judgment: “You’re welcome to make your home with me forever. And what the people think or say is no matter to us” (24). While Dena is accepted by her compassionate sister, she also recognizes that things can never be as they once were. Socially, Henrytown knows that Dena is no longer a virgin, and, consequently, no longer marriage material. For this, she understands she is now an outsider and that her “harmony” with the community is “broken” (25). Dena also recognizes that her identity is drastically altered from her interactions with Langtry. Furthermore, as McDowell notes, Dena’s “humiliations” are “dwarfed” by a greater threat, namely, that Langtry has threatened to kill her if she ever takes up with another man (75).

Despite these social and personal factors working against her, Dena still believes she has a right to a “life that makes sense” (9). Notably, to her, this “life” represents two things: “a hat on your head if the others have got on hats,” and “a name for yourself,

your own name that you were born with, or his name when you marry” (9). Even in the midst of personal trauma and social rejection, Dena believes she deserves certain social rights, and she recognizes the importance, even entitlement, one has to a name. Naming, then, becomes central to the development of Dena’s new identity, and as she slowly begins to piece together a new future, so, too, the variations of Dena’s name presented throughout the novel reflect this progress.

Though Dena’s journey is largely about the creation of a new identity, she experiences great difficulty in this process, and, for much of the novel, is uncertain of how to repair the shreds of her old life or reconstruct a new one. What results is a fragmented and divided self that, as McDowell notes, arises from Dena’s “disturbed” mind” (82). These various fragmentations of Dena’s mental state are presented in several ways and underscore the uncertainties Dena feels regarding her own identity. An example of this tension is seen clearly in Dena’s clothing choices. As Jane Eblen Keller notes, clothing and fabric commonly function within Roberts’s novels as “essential metaphors for conveying the inner lives of her characters,” and typically represent the “deepest levels of female consciousness” (“Power of Cloth” 129). Dena is often described wearing her sister’s clothes, dresses that have been taken “apart and remade...to fit herself” (48). Her dress, which originally belonged to someone else, has been reconstructed to try to fit her needs, and illustrates her attempts to construct a new identity for herself. Dena also wears a “red and pink plaid dress of cotton” when she works in her sister’s vegetable garden, but the colors are “faded from much wear until all [are] blended together” (79). Even the colors of Dena’s dress become indistinguishable and confusing, mirroring her own self image.

Additionally, Dena is often described only in relation to nature or animals. When she first visits Journeyman, the kind man who owns an orchard in Henrytown, she is described vaguely as “a white creature, woman or child, bird or little beast, running unevenly along the brown lane” (61). Viewed from “afar,” Dena’s identity is indistinguishable – she is merely a “bounding thing” traveling down the lane. When Journeyman eventually sees Dena, he begins describing her aloud. Noting that she must be running for a cause or else she would have stopped long ago, Journeyman compares Dena to a tree: “The woman and the tree. Destroyed by its own abundance...loved too much, is all is the matter” (62). His comparison highlights not only his compassion for Dena and her connection to nature, but also the fact that Dena is often only described in terms of other things, such as nature or animals, as she is not a complete or whole person at this point in her journey.

Although Dena struggles to piece together a new identity, she still displays remarkable self-awareness in the midst of her own personal discontinuity. Dena’s constant analysis of her internal life typifies and champions, as McDowell states, the exploration and “exploitation of the subjective life” of Roberts’s heroines” (75). And accordingly, Dena recognizes her fragmented identity early on in the novel during her first trip back into town. While traveling, Dena begins to think of how “one is made up of three or perhaps many more persons and how the sum of all three makes a being that has a name and a place among men” (52). These three identities, she concludes, are made up of “the person one thinks he is and the appearance one thinks he has,” “the thing one actually is,” and “that which the others think” (52-53). These three identities emerge in Dena’s mind and she concludes that the most difficult to know is the second

identity – what one actually is. Though the thoughts leave her “suddenly,” another thought appears, “more clear than any of the others...It was *herself*” (53). Dena mentally explores the various concepts of identity, but she eventually returns to something more organic and more near – her own being, which she feels “sway with the swaying of her feet” (53). She realizes her connection to her own identity, even if only momentarily, through a connection to her physical body.

Most significantly, the source of Dena’s feelings of fragmentation arises from her conflicting feelings towards Langtry. When she returns to her sister’s home, Dena is essentially traumatized from the physical and mental abuse she has received from Langtry and is terrified of his final threat to her: “said I couldn’t hide so far but he would come to find me, and said I might be asleep in Fronia’s house in my room above, and he would climb up to the window and get me through the heart. Said for me to remember every hour what he promised because he did not forget” (69). Langtry’s vow often causes Dena to feel unsafe and on edge, and, in many ways, this looming danger makes Dena mentally unstable and consequently unable to form any type of fixed identity. However, though he is a violent and harsh man, Dena still feels vestiges of love and attraction towards Langtry and despises herself for that. Langtry is not physically present throughout the majority of the novel, and is therefore often symbolized only by his white truck. It is commonly the truck Dena most fears and searches for in the surrounding landscape. She looks for the truck to assure she is safe, but she also finds herself seeking the truck for feelings of “excitement” (54). Feeling guilty for this association, Dena struggles to put away the “ghost of old desires” and searches “herself anew for the meaning of this longing that lay in the heart of her hurt and her hate” (54).

Her heart, then, is conflicted by what she knows presently to be true, that she was right to leave Langtry because he is a violent man, but also by the feelings of sexual “excitement” she still feels. As Journeyman notes, hers is a “great sickness” (73). Dena concludes that although she hates what Langtry did to her, she remains “divided” towards him: “I can hate one and want the other with my whole body and I can’t cure myself, but I know they are all one and all Langtry” (71). Because Dena is unable to reconcile these conflicting feelings and unable to “cure” (73) herself of her divided nature, rather than confront the internal discord she recognizes, she represses her emotions in order to perform her responsibilities on her sister’s farm and function in her daily life.

This repression eventually reemerges in the form of a strange sound Dena hears frequently. Throughout the novel, sounds are often associated with memories. Even the novel’s title, *Black is my Truelove’s Hair*, is a lyric from a folk song sung to Dena by Abner Elliot, one of the first patriarchal figures to demonstrate understanding and acceptance towards Dena’s past, and attests to the importance of sound as an indicator of Dena’s social and personal progress. Dena later links sound and memory together when she recognizes that “the way a person remembers” is often through sound associations or the “shape of a song” (243). Sound, then, in the novel, is an appropriate association with memory, and in Dena’s case, repression of memory.

The reoccurring and ominous sound, described as a “hoon hoon hoon hoon” in which the “n” sound is particularly distinct, vexes several other characters throughout the novel, but is most disturbing to Dena. The noise, she decides, is created by either an owl or a dog, but it is the uncertainty of the source of the sound that troubles her

most (118). McDowell argues that sound allows for an objective manifestation “for the psychic trauma created by her unfortunate experience with Will Langtry” (83). Dena’s psychological repression of her past and its link to sound is underscored by the events surrounding her first encounter with the “hoon hoon” noise. After Fronia lets Dena borrow a pair of her stockings, Dena changes her clothes on the side of the road on her way to a carnival and discovers that Fronia has left a gold thimble in the stockings – a thimble Fronia believes she has lost and has been searching for diligently. Dena, not wanting to miss a ride to the carnival, decides to hide the items in a nearby mailbox. She pushes both the thimble and the stockings “far back into a corner” and “into the shadows” (103). The thimble, specifically, and the act of pushing it into a hidden space, demonstrate the significance of something valuable that has been lost and consequently repressed. The mailbox, however, as one of the Carey daughters is quick to remind Dena, is not a secure space: “Anything in somebody’s mailbox is not very safe” (117). And accordingly, when Dena returns to the mailbox, she finds both the stockings and the thimble gone. The mailbox, then, demonstrates Dena’s repression of her past as well as the dangers and risks of this repression.

It is upon Dena’s return to the mailbox and the discovery that she has lost her sister’s valuable possession that she first hears the “strange sound” that is “not entirely the bark of a dog” nor the “hoot of an owl” (118). As Dena struggles to locate the thimble, the soft “hoon hoon” can periodically be heard in the distance. The sound fills Dena with a “vague apprehension” and she returns home feeling disoriented: “the house inside seemed small and unfamiliar” (119). The next time Dena hears the mysterious noise, she calls for Fronia to listen to it as well, and they both agree that the sound is

“fearful and strange” (148). Adding to their agitation over the “strange owl” is the fact that they cannot decide whether the sound’s origin is near or far. Dena can only conclude that it is the sound of “something a body knows but can’t quite remember” (148). The sound, symbolically, works to remind Dena of her repressed past and of what she is trying to forget, what she senses she “can’t quite remember.” And, more immediately, the “hoon hoon” is a reminder of Fronia’s lost thimble. The unclear origin of the sound speaks of the fragmentation and disconnect Dena feels within herself, and thus she feels uneasy and troubled by the constant reminder of her internal confusion.

Though Dena feels unable to confront her past with Langtry and thus engages in a pattern of repression, the time spent at her sister’s home allows Dena to engage in productive domestic activities and provides a safe space for her socially while she struggles to come to terms with her past. Orphaned at the age of 12, Dena is forced to move in with her twice-widowed sister. Her earliest memories of home are pleasant and she recalls a plot of land she had gardened at her childhood home, and remembers “running lightly among the rows and being filled a great glow of pride in being, and remembered the richness of everything she touched with her fancies and with her hope for some distant afterward when she would have all that she could not then define or name” (225). The death of her parents at such a young age forces Dena to forsake childhood and to grow up quickly. Her relationship with her sister, then, is immensely important as it represents the only immediate family Dena has left. Fronia is significantly older than Dena, and, in this way, also functions as a maternal figure in light of their mother’s death. Fronia’s home serves as the pivotal location for Dena’s process of psychological recovery, and just as Fronia is first seen washing Dena after she returns

from her disgraceful elopement, so, too, Fronia is the first person in Henrytown to wash away Dena's past and to provide her the opportunity for a fresh beginning.

Dena's association with the idea of a home takes various forms as she progresses in her recovery. While her memories of her childhood home are rich and hopeful, and her sister's home functions as a haven from social judgment, Dena also recognizes that she has no immediate ownership of either location. This realization causes Dena to worry if she will ever be forced to leave, "if Fronia would ever want her to be gone from her house" (92). Speaking to Dandy, the plow horse, she acknowledges, "I own not one foot of ground on earth" (92). Like Ellen Chesser, Dena recognizes a desire for personal space, and, to her, a home represents ownership and something concrete she can tie her name to.

Dena's most significant progress psychologically and socially arises from her relationship with Cambron Elliot. After Abner Elliot, Cam's father, graciously befriends Dena, he suggests she take notice of his son Cam. Ab seems bent on orchestrating a relationship between his son and Dena, and repeatedly reminds her "how sweet Cam is and how good and what a way he's got" (157). With Ab's nudging, the two eventually begin a friendship, and, in her fledgling relationship, Cam offers Dena both a chance at marriage and a bridge back from social alienation. As McDowell notes, whereas Roberts intended Langtry to be a symbol of death and "a projection of...the malignant evil in human nature" (80), Cam Elliot has an "opposite effect upon Dena" and symbolically represents "the mystery of life" (qtd. In McDowell 80). Cam is described as warm and vibrant, with a reputation even for "wild" behavior (82). But his actions, as his father is quick to point out, do not arise from immoral behavior, as in the case of

Langtry, but rather from the fact that “Cam is full of song” and “ready to burst with his delight” (161). This fullness overflows into Dena’s life and the language surrounding her experiences with Cam often encompass light and renewal: “the broad light of the sunny day spread over them and the fitful music hummed and went in and out of the air. It was the new world, the new day” (215). The internal rejuvenation that results from Dena’s relationship with Cam aptly illustrates what Roberts described in her journals as the possibility for eternal youth – that which “renews itself continually from beneath” (qtd. in McDowell 80). Cam’s healing presence allows Dena the freedom and security to continue the process that has begun from “beneath,” and provides her additional security for the rebuilding of her fragmented identity and the integration of her growing self with another person.

Cam is willing to offer Dena what Langtry would not: marriage. His proposal of marriage is immensely important in Dena’s journey as it provides her with an honorable position in society and gives her the opportunity to shed her label as “a ruined woman.” As a sign of Cam’s true intentions, he begins making plans for the house he will build for Dena and introduces her to his family. When Cam first takes Dena to meet his mother, Dena is afraid of what the woman thinks of her and concludes she views her in a “bitter search” of sorts (228). However, Mrs. Elliot is kind towards Dena, confiding in her that Cam’s birthday is the following day and graciously showing Dena her garden. When all three return back to the Elliot home, Dena recognizes a “happiness” in Cam that she feels connects her to his mother, and his joy functions as a “link” that binds the “three of them together” (231). When they return to the house, Mr. and Mrs. Elliot share a glass of wine with Dena and Cam, and each makes various toasts and speeches. Cam’s toast

is particularly meaningful as it takes place among his entire family -- a new community that has welcomed Dena in. Cam toasts to “the house we are going to build, Dena and me,” and the family openly concurs (232). This public announcement of his plans to create a new space for himself and Dena marks an important milestone in Dena’s progress towards a meaningful identity. With Cam, she will acquire not only a physical and tangible space for herself, but also a new position in society and a link to a new family.

Dena and Cam find great delight in discussing their various plans for their new home. As the two talk together, Cam begins to describe the specifics of the house and welcomes Dena’s desires and opinions:

“Then one chimney? We’ll have one chimney.”

“I always like two chimneys,” Dena said.

“Two chimneys. One for the kitchen flue and one again for the house.

We’ll have two chimneys.”

“One to work by and one to sit by when the work is done.” (235)

Though Cam has promised to “build the house with the meat” (235) of his own hands, the two “talk of the house together,” and their joint discussion and mutual respect illustrates the ways in which Dena is able to plan a life with Cam, and, consequently, link her identity to his (234). Furthermore, the site for Cam and Dena’s new home is “near to his father’s house,” so near in fact that “the gardens would touch” (236). This linking of the land, and, specifically, of the garden, associated with Cam’s mother, speaks of Dena’s emerging identity on a more social level. Whereas she was once a disgraced woman, Dena is now connected and welcomed into a larger social sphere.

In her engagement to Cam, Dena continues her process of piecing together a new identity. When the banns, or the public announcements for marriages, are eventually called out at church, Dena receives further social affirmation in the form of a public declaration linking her name to Cam's. Notably, it is in this announcement that Dena's full name is revealed: "Twice called, and once more is enough. Aldena Mary Janes is the name, called out twice in church" (260). Dena's identity has now evolved from the nameless woman walking alone on the narrow road, to one that encompasses the entirety of her name, the name she states she hasn't been called "since the day" she was "christened" – a detail which no doubt speaks of a time before her moral fall and thus unifies her current position with one of absolution and grace (260).

Under Cam's kindness and protection, Dena is less concerned with the strange sound that continues to follow her, and, instead, feels great "delight" in their growing relationship. Once, when Dena and Cam are talking under "the great tree," she hears the sound and asks Cam what he thinks it is. Though they disagree over whether the animal truly is a dog or an owl, Dena does "not heed it further" (217). Instead, she is content to lie with Cam "within his warm embrace," acknowledging that "the true warmth of power and of life" is "sitting beside her" (217). Dena's security in her relationship allows her to feel less concern over her past memories, but as she has still not confronted her repression, she is unable to dismiss her anxiety completely. And before the two part for the night, Dena adds that she still wishes she knew "just what kind it is for sure" (219). Though she has companionship, Dena is still concerned with the sound and uneasy about her past.

As Cam and Dena progress in their relationship and Dena finds increasing security, her repressed memories begin to rise to her conscious thoughts. The next time she hears the “hooting dog or the barking owl” (226), Dena admits to herself that the sound reminds her of something more tangible, something she has tried to forget: the shape of Langtry’s gun, the same gun he had threatened to “shoot [her] through” with “six times” (248). This subtle shift in her memories marks the beginning of Dena’s decision to willingly face her past by shaping it into something more concrete and less abstract. As McDowell notes, Dena must come to a place where she is able to dispel “the violence, guilt, and shame of her sexual betrayal by facing it” (80). This conscious acknowledgement of her past must involve a painful journey backwards, and Dena’s ability to confront this reality requires a willingness to enter and identify the source of her repression.

Accordingly, Dena is at Fronia’s home when Cam comes to report that he has “discovered what creature brought the strange cry of the hooting dog” (232). The animal is in fact a dog that lives at a neighbor’s house, and the position of the kennel creates an echo off the barn. Upon learning of the source, Cam and Dena laugh together over the fact that “they solved the echo together” (233). However, even after Dena learns of “the hound” that lives “across Judd’s pasture,” and an explanation is offered for the strange noise, she still desires to defeat the sound, “the thing that came by way of the echo” (241). It is now no longer simply confusion that Dena wants to alleviate, but the source – the thing for what it really is. That the sound Dena has been hearing and haunted by is an echo speaks directly to her fears of an unseen past. Dena recognizes that echoes are a distortion of the real sound and simply a vestige or a remnant of the

original thing. In the same way, Dena's memories are merely echoes of her own past. Yet just as the echo has "followed" her throughout the past year, so, too, she feels the residual effect of her actions with Langtry and often remarks of the power of the past to return: "last year was everywhere in the day and in the air" (238). In the same way that the origin of the sound has been revealed, Dena realizes she must identify the source of her conflicting emotions and divided self. Thus, she continues the necessary path to healing and decides she must willingly enter the emotions and memories she has worked so hard to forget: "she wanted to go into what she had now as remembered of the year before and to shape it, to bring it to something final before she left it" (245). In her mind, Dena then enters into the days of her elopements, recalling various concrete details and conversations. In fragmented recollections highlighted by Roberts's stream-of-consciousness dialogue, Dena embraces the past year "entirely," remembering her shame, disgrace, and fear and follows her memories all the way until the end, "when he let go of her throat and she lay panting on the floor" (252).

Dena repeats this process several times and goes "backward, days without end" (254). Notably, the unfolding of this mental victory takes place among various locations in Fronia's home and land. As Dena's memories are interjected among her actions, she is also described sewing with Fronia, milking the cows, walking "through a morning of the barnyard and garden," and breaking "the beans for the morrow's canning" (253-254). These domestic actions represent a tangible and stable connection back to her real life, and provide physical purpose for her days in order to anchor her deeply internalized and abstract thoughts with something safe and concrete.

Even though Fronia's home provides a safe transitioning place for Dena's psychological progression and Cam's relationship and home preparations speak of Dena's future stability and position in a community, ultimately, Dena is forced to face the reality of her past alone. When Dena hears that Langtry has returned to town, she is reminded that she is a person "over whom a curse" rests and "around whom danger might lie" (265). Feeling herself give way to fear, Dena is reminded of the change in her identity – that she is not the same woman she once was: "She arose mightily above her danger to remember her name linked with Elliot's and called out in the church, as if she came then under the protection of the Mass and stood as vindicated before the women of Henrytown" (265). Recognizing her identity has been repaired, tied to Cam's and, in many ways, restored socially, Dena finds the courage to overcome her fears and face whatever ghosts of "last year" still remain.

When Dena returns home, she senses danger, which she feels "more as a scent than as a sound," and she sees Langtry inside the home, walking "into the shaft of light from Fronia's sitting room" (270). Dena, "wild with fear and haste," runs down the pasture towards the creek and tries to make her way to Journeyman's home, who has promised to hide her if Langtry ever returned. Dena scrambles past several hills and lanes and eventually finds herself along a fence in an open field. Symbolically, this location is described "outside" of "Fronia's land" and "opposite" of the "Elliot's land" (274). In this way, in her greatest moment of crisis, Dena is separated from both of her homes. She decides not to seek shelter with Cam, audibly reminding herself that he is not responsible for her situation: "My own. And not some other one's. It's a thing between Langtry and me. Started a year ago. And tonight to be finished" (276). And

instead, Dean tries, alone, to make her way to Journeyman's. However, she is eventually overtaken by Langtry and he fires two shots in her general direction. Both bullets miss Dena, but rather than continue to flee from her pursuer, she sinks to her knees and waits for Langtry to meet her face to face. Langtry approaches "sobbing," proclaiming that he missed intentionally, that he "couldn't" hit her. Filled with a "gentleness and compassion," Dena addresses Langtry by name and voices the very thing she has feared most: "Do you want to try another time? Do you, Will Langtry? Do you want to try again?...Because if you do, there's not one thing to stop y'. Nobody here but me, myself" (278). Here, in an open field, separated from both her homes, Dena recognizes there is no one able to deal with her past but herself. Her courageous action with Langtry demonstrates Dena's immense psychological growth – the past is no longer something she is running from, but a reality she is willing to face. Able to look, quite literally, at the embodiment of her deepest fears, Dena finds the strength to view Langtry directly, and, consequently, the symbolic manifestation of her fears: "He threw the gun toward her and it fell before her in the moonlit dust. She stepped back two steps farther and watched the weapon where it shone as silver in the white light" (278). The gun's presence provides the physical representation of all Dena's fears and memories. Notably, in the midst of her most serious crisis, with her neck and brow covered with a "cold sweat," Dena begins to speak of the banns: "The banns for me are twice said" (279). Dena's proclamation of her engagement highlights her bravery, reminding Langtry that this was the very behavior he promised to punish, but also serves as resounding reminder of Dena's new identity. Her inner strength and developed identity,

along with her new link to Cam Elliot and his family, provide Dena with the courage to face the threats that have loomed so heavily over her the past year.

Significantly, Langtry is emotionally broken by the encounter and continues to cry, promising that he wouldn't have shot her. As an embodiment or echo of the past, Langtry is stripped of much of his original power and rather than a violent and commanding presence, Dena sees a broken man who is vastly different from the one she remembered. In the midst of the chaos of Dena and Langtry's interaction, Journeyman arrives carrying "an ax in his hand...as if he would use the tool he had brought for a weapon" (279). Journeyman secures Langtry, noting that he is no longer harmful, that he "exploded his murderous mind" when "he fired the gun" (279). In a sudden decision, Journeyman decides he will destroy the gun and brings down "strong blows with the ax" until the gun is "broken and flattened" (279). Journeyman buries the gun against an unidentifiable tree nearby, noting that no one will remember "which tree it's under" (278). Journeyman's act of destroying the weapon symbolizes the end of Dena's fears over her past and the control it has had over her life. The act of burying the gun is also significant, as it speaks of the fact that there is indeed a time to bury the past, but only when the memories have been fully acknowledged, shaped, and confronted – only then can they be safely disassembled and emptied of their power.

Dena's issues of repression and fragmentation are resolved by the story's end, and, much like the beginning, Dena's story concludes alone and on a road: "She had gone from them...she went evenly forward" upon a lane that "went as a solitary tread along the narrow roadway" (281). This repeated image reveals a unity within Dena's story, and, as McDowell notes, suggests the beginning of "another cycle of life," which

“begins for Dena when she walks away from Langtry...just as the previous cycle of her life had begun when she walked away from him” after their previous altercation (83). Safe to recover under her sister’s compassionate roof and accepted by Cam Elliot and his family, Dena has confronted her past fears and now given herself an opportunity to recreate and return to a life “that makes sense.”

Her journey, though, was not without great difficulty, and Roberts unfolds the dangers and perils of a woman’s repression and deep internalization in Dena’s psychological struggles. However, Dena’s courage to return to her past and her ability to recognize and confront her fragmented identity underscores the importance of Dena’s self-awareness as a means to her healing. Consequently, though she chooses to link her name and her identity to Cam’s, her story is not that of a woman losing her identity in the midst of a controlling and limiting patriarchal system. Indeed, Dena’s most difficult struggles and decisions are ultimately faced alone. However, the companionship she receives from Fronia and Cam, and the safe domestic spaces they provide, allow Dena’s inner strength and ability for self acceptance to bud and to flourish. Dena’s psychological triumph at the end of the novel speaks of the mind’s ability to overcome even the darkest of threats. And by the end of her journey, Dena is no longer the nameless woman who “walked the narrow roadway in the hour of the dawn.” She has instead, as the banns symbolize, embodied a larger identity both personally and socially as Aldena Mary Janes – a woman with a right to a name.

Conclusion: “Life is From Within”

Elizabeth Madox Roberts wrote that “life is from within,” and there is perhaps no better sentiment that manifests the importance of the internalized lives of her heroines. Robert Penn Warren notes that Ellen Chesser, like Theodosia and Dena, is on a “spiritual journey, the journey of the self toward the deep awareness of identity, which means peace” (7), and Tina Iraca asserts that Roberts’s protagonists “define themselves through private contemplation and internal revelation” (239). Indeed, though all three of these protagonists face an outward battle, their true victories do not depend on external change or explicit protest; rather these women experience a gentler and often unseen victory – one, as Iraca notes, that demonstrates “the resiliency and...power of the human spirit,” and “prevails even “when adversity overwhelms human frailty” (239). Roberts’s protagonists face and even succumb to great difficulty, but they overcome through their minds and their intellects, and ultimately by the strength of their souls: Ellen Chesser forgives the infidelity of her husband, Theodosia mentally survives the death of her family and friends, and Dena recovers the loss of her reputation. But where she does not explicitly criticize social disadvantages or economic difficulties, Roberts equips each of her protagonists with an inner strength and a seeking mind that is able to surpass, and in that way conquer, even the most life-shattering events. Each of these women decides to choose *life*, no matter is patriarchal or social packaging.

Though their struggles are largely internalized, place is central to the events that unfold in the lives of these women. Wade Hall notes the significance of place in Roberts’s fiction, asserting that location is “critically important” in her stories, as it

“informs, shapes, and reinforces what people do” (53). The home, then, is often the space which functions as a manifestation of Roberts’s protagonists’ internalized and feminine journeys. This space is sometimes portrayed as immensely powerful and dangerous, as in the case of Theodosia, but can also function as a safe and productive domestic space, like Fronia’s home in *Black is My Truelove’s Hair*. The home is an important physical location and symbolic representation in the lives of each woman and often reflects their deepest longings and fears regarding their identities.

Additionally, though the home is presented as a complex and mysterious, even dangerous space, Roberts’s female characters nevertheless continually choose domesticity at the end of their journeys: they return to the home, they embrace relationships, and they continue to engage in daily life. Furthermore, as Iraca notes, “Roberts’s female characters reside in a world of connectedness; men and women, families, friends, and even enemies inhabit each other’s lives” (244). Accordingly, their journeys end in relation to others: Theodosia welcomes another chance at love with Caleb Burns, a cow farmer in Spring Valley, Ellen remains with her husband and children, and Dena finds a safe relationship and a new family with Cam Elliot. In this way, these women do not reject the home or the domestic; instead, they form some semblance of a happy ending from it.

Though Iraca argues that Roberts can, in some ways, be seen as a feminist writer, in that her female characters are “not limited to secondary roles but lead the plot and articulate thematic issues” (242), her protagonists outwardly do not support the ideas of many of the influential feminist writings of the 1960s and 70s, such as *The Feminine Mystique*, which argues for a rejection of the home and of patriarchal

authority.⁶ However, Roberts's protagonists portray many admirable feminist qualities, including strength, self-awareness, and creativity. Indeed, these women often find a sense of worth and wellbeing that exists outside the home, and find purpose and meaning through some sort of creative expression. For Theodosia, this outlet takes the form of music. A talented fiddle player, she often makes sense of the world and expresses her emotions through her relationship to music. After discovering the truth of her father's licentiousness and rejecting his own incestuous advances towards her, Theodosia finds solace in her music studies: "No one but the music teacher reached her inner immunity. Their duos for violin and piano, for two violins, became two remote minds conversing as abstraction was laid over against abstraction, theme against theme, and once, for experiment, key against key" (106). In this way, Roberts links Theodosia's inner searching with her love of music. Ellen, in a similar way, uses gardening and other "domestic" chores, including sewing, to explore her mind and her relationship to the world around her. Able to contribute to her family's need for survival, Ellen finds a place to explore ideas and reap creative interests. While gardening, Ellen's mind achieves a certain oneness with nature, and her mind penetrates "the crumbling clod with [questions]...that gathered around some unspoken word such as 'why' or 'how.'" Thus until her act of breaking open the clay was itself a search" (362). Free to exercise creative license, Ellen is able to probe her own mind and search for meaning to her deepest questions. Both women seek agency outside of the home that allows for creativity, and both women are better for it.

In this way, Roberts's protagonists are not weak women; in fact, as Iraca notes, they are "strong female characters" who "undertake the epic human struggle to make

one's way in the world" (239). This understanding of a "human struggle" is essential in reading Roberts's female characters. She is concerned, first and foremost, with the shared struggles of humanity, including loss, death, and change. That Roberts chooses women to convey this condition speaks of the strength and capabilities she believes they possess. If "life is from within," as Roberts writes, then her female protagonists can be viewed as women of great courage with admirable intellects who are not defeated, but display dignity and power.

Historical context is also necessary in understanding the personal victories of Roberts's female characters. As Jane Eblen Keller notes, a woman's ability to leave her husband, or community for that matter, is extremely "new," in any kind of "cultural or historical sense" ("interview"). In this way, at the time of Roberts's novels, a woman's agency was often limited. To return again to Kate Chopin's landmark feminist novel, *The Awakening*, Edna's suicide is often celebrated in feminist literary history as a triumph over and ultimate rejection of the patriarchal system. But Ellen and Theodosia reject death as an honorable option and instead choose life. As Warren notes, Ellen's true victory comes in the "discovery of the strength to deal" with her life – not destroy it – and Roberts's novels illustrate the beauty, virtue, and courage aligned with that decision.

If feminist critics are truly concerned with reclaiming women's voices that have been marginalized and neglected, then recovery of Roberts is long overdue. In a 1954 essay in the *Southwest Review*, Harry Modean Campbell assails the "critical neglect of Elizabeth Madox Roberts during the last few years of her life and since her death in 1941" (337). Arguing that her work is not dated in content or style, Campbell compares Roberts to Willa Cather, and acknowledges that Roberts "did not write so much as

Cather,” but that Roberts’s four best novels are comparable to Cather’s four best. In fact, he adds, in some ways, “Roberts is decidedly superior to Cather” (337). Indeed, comparisons such as Campbell’s demonstrate the popularity and quality of Roberts’s work in light of her contemporaries.

Earl H. Rovit, for example, in 1961, freely compares Roberts to Emily Dickinson, noting, “both were at one in their dedication to the introspective focus – in their faith that the life outside is a wind blowing in a mirror, and that one must search within to find the ‘internal difference, / Where the Meanings are’” (157). Likewise, McDowell posits that in “method and techniques” Roberts suggests a closer resemblance to “Virginia Woolf than with most” of her “American contemporaries” (preface), and Iraca questions that “if feminist literary criticism prides itself on uncovering bodies of works authored by females, works that reveal the interiority of the female, [and] the human imagination, why hasn’t Roberts been embraced and revived like...Kate Chopin or Doris Lessing?” (243). These comparisons highlight the Modern and the feminine similarities that so prominently define these works, but the associations also link Roberts’s reputation with some of the most famous and influential English writers of the twentieth century. If Roberts shares such a likeness with Cather, Dickinson, and Woolf, not to mention her many comparisons to William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and a host of other Southern and Modern writers,⁷ how has her work suffered such critical neglect in recent years while theirs has not?

One explanation is in Roberts’s portrayal of domesticity and the home. For this reason, a modern audience must approach Roberts’s work with both cultural and historical considerations, as well as an understanding of her intent and desire to give

meaning to the lives of Kentucky women during the early twentieth century and elevate the power of the mind and the human spirit above all. For Roberts, this elevation does not necessarily mean outward social change or victory; instead, it is a gentle trumpeting of the strength of the soul: it is Theodosia suddenly leaving her aunt's insidious home. It is Ellen vowing to follow the man she is pledged to, no matter its repercussions, and it is Dena, sinking on her knees in the open land, willing to face the past that once crippled her with fear. These women do, indeed, achieve victory in their journeys. Fittingly, their stories often mirror Journeyman's words to Dena, in which he tells the tale of an injured "sea bird, lost on land" he found by the side of the river. He builds a cage in order to "save it from the foxes and skunks," but he eventually takes the cage away, allowing the bird to go free. While it does not fly away immediately, it eventually finds the strength to recover, and one day, with a "sudden wild cry," flies "off into the air with a great sudden flip-flop of wings" (178-9). The bird, Journeyman informs Dena, was "trapped by life, but not trapped, by God!" (179). His story offers perspective and hope to Dena's situation, that no matter the barriers or confinements on one's existence, the "sudden" and "wild" life that is within – the soul – is never trapped.

Notes

1. Wade Hall, in his introduction to the 2000 edition of *The Time of Man*, acknowledges the efforts of others who sought to revive Robert's reputation in the second half of the twentieth century, including "Frederick McDowell, author of the Roberts volume in the Twayne series of American authors, and the editors of *The Southern Review*, who published a special issue dedicated to her in the fall of 1984" (vii).
2. Though critics disagree over the exact dates of second-wave feminism, many attribute the beginning dates to Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*; however, others argue that Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 publication (published in the United States in 1953), *The Second Sex*, was a more influential text for the movement.
3. Elaine Showalter argues that "each generation of women writers has found itself, in a sense, without a history, forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex" (qtd. in Carr 127). However, Showalter suggests that there remains a "female literary tradition," which includes three parts: imitation, critique and self-discovery (qtd. in Carr 127).
4. Not all characters fit this mold: Theodosia is educated and comes from a family that at one time had great wealth, and Diony Hall in *The Great Meadow* is educated and regarded as well off.
5. Herbert A. Otto and Robert B. Andersen discuss the custom of hope chests in their article "The Hope Chest and Dowry: American Custom?" Otto and Andersen contend that in the latter half of the nineteenth and twentieth century, hope chests were an established practice, particularly among girls "with either a peasant or middle class background" (15). They conclude that "the hope chest represents, on a symbolical level,

a young woman's aspirations and on a reality level, her concrete investment in the marital state" (19).

⁶ Iraca also argues that Diony, in *The Great Meadow*, is, in some ways, privileged above the male characters, and has a great deal of "female power," including the agency of choice.

⁷ McDowell also cites Roberts among a lineage that includes Thomas Wolfe, Robert Penn Warren and Caroline Gordon (preface).

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