

**Title:** Re-visioning the Wilderness: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Ellen Foster*  
**Author(s):** Kristina K. Groover  
**Publication Details:** *Southern Quarterly* 37.3-4 (Spring 1999): p187-197.  
**Source:** *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 145. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. p187-197. From *Literature Resource Center*.  
**Document Type:** Critical essay

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2001 Gale Group, COPYRIGHT 2007 Gale, Cengage Learning

[(essay date Spring 1999) *In the following essay, Groover contrasts the quests in Gibbons's Ellen Foster and Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn.*]

*Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.--Author's note [Adventures of Huckleberry Finn]*

Mark Twain's disclaimer notwithstanding, Huck Finn's journey down the Mississippi is linked--by motive, moral, and plot--with a pervasive tradition in American mythology and literature: the notion that quest, the lone journey into the wilderness, forms the quintessential American experience. In his 1954 work *The American Adam*, R. W. B. Lewis describes the protagonist at the center of this myth as "a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history" (1); he is "happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling" (5). Within this myth, maturation and self-discovery are defined by a linear journey in which the protagonist gains increasing levels of autonomy and separation from family and community. As Huck Finn embarks on his journey, he leaves behind not only his abusive father, but the Widow Douglass, school, church, and all other social forces which threaten to "sivilize" him.

Despite the universality which its central position in American literature implies, a quest tradition defined by flight from family and community into an untamed wilderness is a tradition which pointedly excludes women. As Nina Baym points out, only men in American society have historically had the mobility required to produce a "believable flight into the wilderness" (72). Women within this tradition are cast not as questing heroes, but as the domestic conservators whom the heroic Adam must flee. Mythic heroes from Natty Bumppo to Nick Adams leave behind mothers, wives, sisters, and lovers as they embark on solitary quests in search of self-knowledge and truth. This paradigm of the American literary hero as a lone adventurer is less illustrative of "the uniquely American," Baym argues, than of "what is alleged to be the universal male psyche" (79). Indeed, the Adamic myth finds corroboration in studies of male and female psychological development which suggest that maturing males in American culture learn to value individuation, separation, and linear movement, while girls and young women learn to value affiliation and community.<sup>1</sup>

Women's exclusion from the quest tradition is particularly important when considering the quest plot as not merely an adventure story, but as the central paradigm for spiritual experience in the American literary tradition. As his name implies, the American Adam's roots are not only literary and historical, but spiritual as well. Early Puritan texts depict the literal sojourn in the New England wilderness as a spiritual descent into the wilderness of the soul. In the mid-nineteenth century, when Puritanism no longer dominated the imaginations of most American writers, a pervasive concern with soul, spirit, and metaphysical experience continued to mark the writings of the Transcendentalists and their inheritors. And, despite the break with tradition that distinguishes much twentieth-

century American literature, many works from the modernist canon depict crowded but spiritually void urban landscapes which reveal the intersection between the physical and the spiritual, the literal and the psychic to be found in the wilderness quest. Texts throughout the American canon depict the quest as a spiritual journey, a search for transcendence and meaning beyond the temporal world. If female characters are excluded from quest--the central paradigm for spiritual experience in American literary tradition--are they also excluded from the realm of spirituality? Or do texts by American women authors offer alternative patterns for spiritual seeking?

Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Kaye Gibbons's *Ellen Foster* offer a prototype for examining the revision of the quest myth by American women writers. Both Huck and Ellen are children without protection in a threatening adult world; they are motherless, and are victimized by abusive fathers. Both are from southern, rural backgrounds and struggle with the racism of their communities. Finally, both texts are shaped by the quest motif, although the shapes and the goals of the journeys they depict are quite different. Huck Finn, like other Adamic heroes in the canonical literature, flees the restrictions imposed by home and family in order to seek freedom on the great river. The Mississippi River valley, described in Edenic terms, becomes a mythic wilderness in which Huck wrestles with his community's hypocrisy. His journey is not only a physical escape from society's strictures, but the struggle to transcend his community's values and to act on his own innate sense of morality. When he returns, reluctantly, to his community, it is only for a brief time: in order to maintain his integrity as the questing American hero, he must "light out for the Territory" rather than become "sivilized." While Jim's freedom at the end of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is a literal release from the bondage of slavery, Huck's is a spiritual and psychic freedom from the entrapment represented by society.

For Ellen Foster, however, homelessness represents not freedom, but spiritual oblivion. Although she does embark on a quest, it is not the canonical hero's linear flight *from* home and the restrictions it imposes, but a circular journey *to* home and its promise of physical and spiritual nurturance. From the safety of her new home, Ellen declares that "even when I laid out flat and still my legs felt like they were walking again. But I would not move ever from there" (120). For Ellen Foster, home is not a source of entrapment, but a sacred space which represents the fulfillment of all desire.

While, traditionally, domestic themes have served as the invisible backdrop for "important" action in American literature, recent studies such as Ann Romines's *The Home Plot* (1992) and Helen Fiddymant Levy's *Fiction of the Home Place* (1993) have identified "domestic fiction" as an important literary form during both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of these domestic texts not only convey distinctive values and traditions associated with domesticity, they also critique the spiritual quest motif, subordinating it to a female-defined spirituality centered in the home. For these novelists, home serves not merely as the seat of traditional Christian piety, as in many sentimental domestic novels of the mid-nineteenth century, but as its own source of spiritual truth. In these texts, the routine, cyclical tasks of caring for children, doing housework, and tending gardens take place within a distinctly female version of mythic time.<sup>2</sup> Characters in these works experience a fluidity between the spiritual and temporal worlds, locating spiritual truth in home and community rather than in the solitude of a wilderness quest. By portraying home as sacred, these texts deconstruct conventional dualisms between spirit and body, heaven and earth, God and human.

Domestic work, in literature as in life, is a paradox: it carries little prestige, is low-paid or unpaid, and is, by its very nature, undone nearly as quickly as it is completed; yet it is also the work without which, as Virginia Woolf writes in *A Room of One's Own*, "those seas would be unsailed and those fertile lands a desert" (116). While traditional male activity is linear and quest-oriented, domestic activity is by its very nature cyclical and repetitive. Domestic work is, in Romines's terms, a "sacramental activity" which perpetuates both the physical and the spiritual well-being of a household (6). Its cyclical nature approximates women's experience of time as cyclical rather than linear, and its close association with the well-being of household members reflects women's concern with relationship and community. When it functions to preserve and sustain life against a harsh external world, domestic ritual has transcendent power, blurring the distinction between earthly and spiritual life.

Both *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Ellen Foster* open with scenes of domestic life gone wrong. The first line of *Ellen Foster* both evokes and fractures the incantatory "once upon a time" of myth: "When I was little," eleven-year-old Ellen reflects, "I would think of ways to kill my daddy" (1). The child who dreams of killing her own father signifies a distortion of natural order brought about by violence, neglect, and incest. In keeping with mythic tradition, Ellen views the distortion of her family life as having supernatural significance, her fractured domestic life serving as a symptom of spiritual disorder. Raised by an alcoholic father and a sickly and ineffectual mother, she describes her family's deterioration in apocalyptic terms which contrast sharply with her usually pragmatic language and tone: "Everything was so wrong like somebody had knocked something loose and the one in charge strolled off and let us spin and shake and fly off the rail" (2). For Ellen, her family's degeneration is a cosmic event suggesting abandonment by "the one in charge." Similarly, the relatives who fail to protect her are not merely uncaring, they are personifications of evil. "She had some power," Ellen says of her hateful maternal grandmother. "Without saying one word she could make my bones shake and I would think of ghost houses and skeletons rattling in all the closets. Her power was the sucking kind that takes your good sense and leaves you limp like a old zombie" (68).

Huckleberry Finn, too, is a victim of his father's neglect and abuse. Pap Finn, like Ellen Foster's father, "drank his own self to death," but not before kidnapping his son, beating him, and leaving him locked up day and night in a riverside cabin. In *Huckleberry Finn*, however, domestic concerns move quickly to the margins of the quest story. As he takes to the river with Jim, Huck flees not only his father's abuse, but the Widow Douglass's attempts to "sivilize" him. As he plans the escape from his father's cabin, Huck muses, "I didn't want to go back to the widow's any more and be so cramped up and sivilized, as they called it. ... I reckoned I would walk off with the gun and some lines, and take to the woods when I ran away. I guessed I wouldn't stay in one place, but just tramp right across the country, mostly night times, and hunt and fish to keep alive, and so get so far away that the old man nor the widow couldn't ever find me any more" (23). Huck revels not in the safety and protection of the Widow's home, but in his freedom. After two months on his own, Huck confesses that "I didn't see how I'd ever got to like it so well at the widow's, where you had to wash, and eat on a plate, and comb up, and go to bed and get up regular ..." (22). In Mark Twain's text, home is thus constructed as a place that the questing hero longs to escape.

For Huck Finn, spiritual transcendence is found not in the home, but in the wilderness of the great river, far from the interference of civilization. Huck describes life on the river in Edenic terms: in the morning he and Jim "set down on the sandy bottom and watched the daylight come. Not a sound, anywheres--perfectly still--just like the whole world was asleep" (99); at night, "Sometimes we'd have the whole river to ourselves for the longest time" (100). Although Huck, like Ellen Foster, is an intensely practical figure, he nonetheless finds in the wilderness setting a transcendent sense of peace and freedom which precipitates a rare moment of speculation about the nature of the universe: "We had the sky, up there, all speckled with stars, and we used to lay on our backs and look up at them, and discuss about whether they was made, or only just happened ..." (101).

Significantly, it is only when Huck and Jim occasionally disembark and encounter people from riverside towns that their quest is threatened. The innocence of the questing American hero confronted with a corrupt civilization is illustrated most poignantly in Huck's encounter with the Grangerfords, who welcome Huck into their home when a steamboat runs over the raft in a fog and forces him ashore. Initially, Huck admires both the Grangerford family and their comfortable home, which seems richly luxurious to him. He is shocked, however, by the senselessness of the Grangerfords' long-time feud with the Shepherdsons, none of whom can remember "what the row was about in the first place" (92). When he observes a shoot-out between the two families in which Buck, a boy his own age, is killed, Huck is horrified: "It made me so sick I most fell out of the tree. ... I wished I hadn't ever come ashore that night, to see such things" (97-98). Mark Twain thus represents family and community life--even in the guise of the seemingly kind and generous Grangerfords--as dangerous and duplicitous, at odds with the heroic quest and with Huck's innate sense of morality. When Huck flees back to the wilderness--to the raft and to Jim--his troubles subside: "We said there warn't no home like a raft, after all. Other places do seem so cramped up and smothery, but a raft don't. You feel mighty free and easy and comfortable on a raft" (99). While home is a stifling and even corrupting influence, the wilderness offers freedom and transcendence beyond the "sivilized" world.

For Ellen Foster, however, the domestic realm does not suffocate, but rather sustains and preserves life. When her mother is ill, Ellen cleans the house and fixes the meals, disdaining her father for his failure to provide care. She describes activities such as gardening with her mother in Biblical terms: "my mama ... liked to work in the cool of the morning. She nursed all the plants and put even the weeds she pulled up in little piles along the rows. ... Weeds do not bear fruit" (49). Even after her mother's death, Ellen's few memories of domestic happiness serve as parables, stories which provide life lessons for a child without a mother to guide her:

I know I have made being in the garden with her into a regular event but she was really only well like that for one season. You see if you tell yourself the same tale over and over again enough times then the tellings become separate stories and you will generally fool yourself into forgetting you only started with one solitary season out of your life. That is how I do it. (49)

Preserved in Ellen's memory, domestic practices serve a spiritual role, providing guidance and connecting the living and the dead.

Living essentially alone except for her father's occasional drunken visits, Ellen, like Huck Finn, is a child free from parental restrictions. Unlike Huck, who revels in his freedom, however, Ellen strives to duplicate a "normal" family life for herself. Following her mother's example, she compensates for her lack of a home and family by "mothering" herself while she waits for a new home. Alone, she plays "family," cutting out pictures of a man, a woman, and children and outfitting them with cut-out domestic comforts from the Sears catalog. When she joins the Girl Scouts, Ellen plays the role of her own parent, "sign[ing] my daddy's initials saying I had made a handicraft or wrapped a ankle or whatever the badge called for" (27). While Huck and Jim shed even the restriction of clothing while living on the raft, Ellen comforts herself by wearing bits of her mother's clothing under her own dresses. And, while Huck Finn pulls fish from the river and steals melons from gardens, Ellen chooses the food that most resembles, for her, a proper meal: "I found the best deal was the plate froze with food already on it. A meat, two vegetables, and a dab of dessert" (25). While Ellen can replicate the domestic trappings of a real home, however, she knows that its essence lies not in material things, but in maternal love. Taking control of her own destiny, Ellen defines the goal of her quest in domestic terms: "I decided that if I quit wasting time I could be happy as anybody else in the future. ... And that is what I did. That is why I think I am somebody now because I said by damn this is how it is going to be and before I knew it I had a new mama" (95).

In the course of their quests, both Huck and Ellen reject conventional religion as ineffectual at best and hypocritical at worst. Living at the Widow's house, Huck exposes the falsity of Miss Watson's religious platitudes:

She told me to pray every day, and whatever I asked for I would get it. But it warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. It warn't no good to me without hooks. I tried for the hooks three or four times, but somehow I couldn't make it work. By-and-by, I asked Miss Watson to try for me, but she said I was a fool. She never told me why, and I couldn't make it out no way. (11)

Even while admiring the Grangerfords, Huck recognizes their duplicity as they sit in church with guns held between their knees, then talk admiringly afterward of the preacher's sermon on brotherly love. Ellen, similarly, recognizes the hypocrisy of traditional religion in the blundering, superficial minister who performs her mother's funeral service:

I do not know this preacher. He says that even though he did not know my mama he feels like he knew her well because he has met us and we are all so nice. It does not bother him that what he said does not make good sense. And what else are you going to say when the Bible comes flat out and says killing yourself is flinging God's gift back into his face and He will not forgive you for it ever? The preacher leaves that out and goes straight to the green valleys and the streets of silver and gold. (20)

For Ellen, the easy platitudes of conventional religion provide neither help nor comfort. When she learns that her new mama receives financial support from a local congregation, she accepts her obligations pragmatically: "You go

in that church and act genuine. Even if you think what he has to say that week is horse manure or even if you believe it is a lie you sit there and be still. Worse could happen than for you to sit for an hour. You could be where you came from" (56).

Living with her new mama, Ellen finds that real fulfillment comes not during church, but afterward, in her new home. Ellen confesses that she stays "starved" all through the service, waiting for the real nourishment that comes afterward: "When or if you come to my house now after church you will smell all the things that have been simmering on low. It has been waiting for me and me for it" (58). As important as the physical nourishment of Sunday dinner is the spiritual nourishment gained through the ritual of preparing food for the coming week, a communal activity that is at the heart of Ellen's new domestic life:

Everything we do almost on Sundays has to do with food. When we finish the meal on hand it is time to prepare chicken salad, ham salad, bread, three bean soup, or what have you for that week's lunch boxes. ...Everybody like me, Stella, Francis, my new mama, Jo Jo, but not the baby are involved in this Sunday cooking. ...Today it is bread and soup. It does not sound like much but it is hardy and I like to show it off in the lunchroom when all the other people have a measly tray of this or that.(58)

In comparison to the Sunday dinner and rich domestic ritual that follows the service, churchgoing is an empty tradition.

As ineffectual as the church as a source of healing is the school psychologist with whom Ellen meets weekly. The psychologist's inscrutable questions, his accusations of defensiveness and twisting of Ellen's words "like a miracle into exactly what he wanted me to say" make it impossible for her to tell the truth about her life. "I do not plan to discuss chickenshit with you," she tells him definitively on her final visit. "I might be confused sometimes in my head but it is not something you need to talk about. Before you can talk you have to line it all up in order and I had rather just let it swirl around until I am too tired to think" (89). In order to recover from her past, Ellen requires not the professional care of a minister or psychologist, but the loving care found in the home. "[T]here have been more than a plenty days," Ellen says of her new mama, "when she has put both my hands in hers and said if we relax and breathe slow together I can slow down shaking. And it always works" (121). Her new mama's "cure" for Ellen's troubles lies in such nurturing activities as washing Ellen's hair ("I feel her long fingers on my head and pray that it takes a long time for me to be clean," Ellen confesses), sewing and cooking for her, and including her in the communal activities of the household (36). Through domestic ritual and maternal love, this foster mother nurtures not only Ellen, but all of her girls. "You don't need to see through the walls here to know when my new mama is alone with one of her girls telling them about how to be strong or rubbing their backs," Ellen reports. "You can imagine it easy if it has happened to you" (121). In Kaye Gibbons's fictional world, healing of both body and spirit is found in the home.

As she establishes family and domestic life as sources of transcendence, Gibbons redefines home and family. Like Pap Finn, Ellen's own relatives threaten her safety rather than protecting and nurturing her. After her mother's death, Ellen's father fails to provide for her most basic needs, neglecting either to feed her or to pay the power bill. When her father and his friends make their sporadic raids on the kitchen, Ellen is affronted at this invasion of her domestic space: "Who said they could come in my house and have a free-for-all?" she wonders. "Who said they could be here?" (37). Ellen's other relatives also prove inadequate at providing care. Ellen describes the few days she spends with her Aunt Betsy as a scene of domestic bliss:

All afternoon and night and on into the next day is like magic. I do not think of anything but the flowers on the sheets and the bubbles in the bath water.This is the life.(41)

Unlike Huck, who finds such trappings "smothery," Ellen is supremely happy amidst these domestic comforts. While Aunt Betsy is happy enough to have Ellen spend a weekend with her, however, she has no intention of becoming a surrogate mother. When the court places Ellen with her maternal grandmother, her unsuitability as a

mother figure is signified by Ellen's description of her house as a "museum" full of "what-nots" that she is forbidden to touch. Even the meals her grandmother serves illustrate the gulf between the two. On most days, Ellen comes home to find a plate left for her in the kitchen. On Sundays, however, when she and her grandmother share the dinner table, "we both picked at our little individual chickens or turkeys and did not talk" (66). Compared to the communal tradition that accompanies meal preparation at her new mama's house, meal time in her grandmother's home reflects the absence of a true family life.

While Ellen is taken in grudgingly by her own relatives, she is lovingly embraced by a variety of alternative families. When her father sexually abuses her, Ellen flees not into the wilderness, as Huck Finn does in fleeing from his own abusive father, but to a loving home: that of her friend, Starletta. From her own lonely home, Ellen has often watched the smoke rising from Starletta's chimney, musing that "[y]ou know it is a warm fire where the smoke starts" (29). When her father assaults her, Ellen instinctively runs "down the road to Starletta. Now to the smoke coming out of the chimney against the night sky I run" (38). When she is placed in a temporary home with her art teacher and her husband, Ellen observes longingly that "the three of us could pass for a family on the street" (55). In contrast to Ellen's "real" family, Julia and Roy allow her to be a child for the first time in her life:

She said it was good I loosened up. We would run around and she would tell me to let it all hang out. Let your hair down good golly Miss Molly let it all hang out. Go with the flow, she would say. Make up a tune and throw in some words and go with the flow. I had no idea people could live like that. (47)

While such alternative families prove far better at meeting Ellen's needs than does her own family, however, the court insists that she be placed with her own relatives, again signifying the ineffectiveness of institutions in providing care. "What do you do when the judge talks about the family society's cornerstone but you know yours was never a Roman pillar but is and always has been crumbly old brick?" Ellen wonders. "He had us all mixed up with a different group of folks" (56). Her forced return to her nightmarish relatives recalls Huck Finn's similar plight at the hands of another well-meaning but uninformed judge: "The judge and the widow went to law to get the court to take me away from him and let one of them be my guardian; but it was a new judge that had just come, and he didn't know the old man; so he said courts mustn't interfere and separate families if they could help it; said he'd druther not take a child away from its father" (19-20). While Ellen persists in her search for family, however, redefining family in the process, Huck rejects the very notion of family. At the end of his adventure, when Tom Sawyer's Aunt Sally vows to adopt and "sivilize" Huck, he balks: "I can't stand it. I been there before" (245). While domesticity threatens to encroach on Huck's freedom as long as he remains within reach of the Widow Douglass and Aunt Sally, beyond the Mississippi River valley lies the seemingly endless wilderness of the Territory, with its seductive promise of quest, freedom, and adventure.

Ellen's desperate quest for a home and family gradually leads her to question the racism she has inherited from her community. Although she seeks shelter from her father at Starletta's house, Ellen refuses to eat any of the food Starletta's mother prepares; wary of staying in a "colored house," she sleeps, fully dressed, on top of the covers. Reflecting her community's bigotry, she worries, "As fond as I am of all three of them I do not think I could drink after them. I try to see what Starletta leaves on the lip of a bottle but I have never seen anything with the naked eye. If something is that small it is bound to get into your system and do some damage" (29-30). While she is living with her grandmother, Ellen is cared for by Mavis, a black servant who tells her stories of her mother's girlhood and shields her from her grandmother's cruelty. Each evening, Ellen walks to Mavis's house to watch her and her family. Seeing their care for one another, Ellen begins to reconsider her own understanding of family:

I started a list of all that a family should have. Of course there is the mama and the daddy but if one has to be missing then it is OK if the one left can count for two ...While I watched Mavis and her family I thought I would bust open if I did not get one of them for my own self soon. Back then I had not figured out how to go about getting one but I had a feeling it could be got. (67)

As she gains experience with her own neglectful family and with the outsiders who care for her, Ellen gradually

reconsiders the meaning of family:

I am old now I know it is not the germs you cannot see that slide off her lips and on to a glass then to your white lips that will hurt you or turn you colored. What you had better worry about though is the people you know and trusted they would be like you because you were all made in the same batch. You need to look over your shoulder at the one who is in charge of holding you up and see if that is a knife he has in his hand. And it might not be a colored hand. But it is a knife. ...When I stayed with my mama's mama I made a list of all that I wanted my family to be and I put down white and have running water. Now it makes me ashamed to think I said that. (85)

In redefining family, Gibbons suggests that blood ties cannot always be trusted to "[hold] you up." Far from creating a despairing picture of family, Gibbons merely widens her focus, finding love and support for her heroine from sources that the rural southern community rejects. Ellen finds the love that sustains her only when she abandons both her community's prejudices and its restrictive definition of family.

Huck Finn, too, must reject his community's prejudices in order to fulfill his quest. Although Huck lives on the margins of his community, he has internalized its bigotry: he acknowledges that Jim "had an uncommon level head, for a nigger" (65) but claims that "you can't learn a nigger to argue" (68); and, when he ascertains Jim's grief over being parted from his family, Huck muses wonderingly, "I do believe he cared just as much for his people as white people does for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so" (131). Through his physical journey, Huck literally leaves behind Miss Watson, the Grangerfords, and the duke and dauphin--who, Huck declares, make him "ashamed of the human race" (137)--as representatives of society's restrictiveness, hypocrisy, and racism. He only fulfills his spiritual quest, however, when he also rejects the moral values his society embodies by allowing Jim to share his flight to freedom. Although he is shocked and ashamed to find himself a "nigger-stealer," Huck bravely resolves to "go to hell" if he must in order to help his friend. The plight of the runaway slave is thus cast in terms of the Adamic myth: Jim, like Huck, must leave family and community behind to find freedom.

In a revision of the quest tradition, Ellen resolves her relationship with Starletta not by sharing a flight to freedom, but by sharing her home. Equally as important as the physical nurturance her new mama offers Ellen is her unhesitating welcome for Starletta:

My new mama says sure Starletta can come stay with us ...Have you ever felt like you could cry because you know you just heard the most important thing anybody in the world could have spoke at that second? ... All that mattered in my world at that second was my new mama and the sound of yes in my ears oh yes Starletta is welcome here. (99)

Ellen's preparation for Starletta's arrival is a series of domestic rituals: she cleans the house, has her new mama embroider Starletta's initials on a set of towels, and gives instructions about the supper menu. When Starletta arrives, Ellen shares with her her favorite activity: lying on the bed in her room, waiting for dinner. "I will lay here too and wait for supper beside a girl that every rule in the book says I should not have in my house much less laid still and sleeping beside me," Ellen muses. "I came a long way to get here but when you think about it real hard you will see that old Starletta came even farther" (125-26). The fulfillment of Ellen's quest is thus located both in home and in family--a family defined neither by blood ties nor by race, but by love and care.

The conclusion of each text highlights Twain's and Gibbons's differing versions of the spiritual quest fulfilled. At the end of his journey, Huck "light[s] out for the Territory," thus signifying that the hero's quest can only be fulfilled in the flight from home and community. Ellen Foster's journey, however, is one she is happy to abandon when she arrives at her new mama's home: "I have laid in my bed many many days since that first afternoon I heard her in the kitchen and I am always as glad to rest as I was then" (120). Ellen signifies her integration into this domestic life by signing her school papers with a new name:

That may not be the name God or my mama gave me but that is my name now. Ellen Foster. ... Before I even met Stella or Jo Jo or the rest of them I heard they were the Foster family. Then I moved in the house and met everybody and figured it was OK to make my name like theirs. Something told me I might have to change it legal or at church but I was hoping I could slide by the law and folks would think I came by the name natural after a while.(88)

In choosing her name, Ellen again rejects the authority of both the courts and the church. Her new name signifies instead the authority of her own experience: no longer alone in the world, nor the daughter of an abusive father, she belongs to a loving home of her own choosing.

The quest myth that dominates the American literary canon, shaped by male psychology and male social position, reflects both the desire for separation and the freedom to choose autonomy from home, family, and community. As Baym suggests, this paradigm illuminates a central American myth regarding the relationship of the individual to society:

The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. The promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves. The myth also holds that, as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality.(71)

Although female characters are largely excluded from this quest tradition, however, they are not excluded from spiritual experience in literary texts.<sup>3</sup> In *Ellen Foster*, Kaye Gibbons revises the spiritual quest paradigm by suggesting that transcendent experience may be located not only in an uninhabited wilderness, but in the midst of family and community. In Gibbons's text, the flight from home is an exhausting and terrifying journey; home, by contrast, offers both physical and spiritual safety. By treating home as sacred space, *Ellen Foster*--as well as numerous texts by Willa Cather, Harriette Arnow, Eudora Welty, Ellen Glasgow, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and others--redefines spirituality based on women's experience of domestic life and their valuing of affiliation and community. Female characters in these works seek transcendence not in male myths of freedom and wilderness, but in the familiar terrain of women's domestic lives.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, and Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Study of Gender*. For a discussion of masculinity as the norm in the psychological theories of Freud, Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, and other researchers, see Gilligan, chapter 1, "Woman's Place in Man's Life Cycle." In *Toward a New Psychology of Women*, Jean Baker Miller argues that the very idea of male separation is a myth which gains its power not through its truth, but through its prescriptive quality: "Few men ever attain such self-sufficiency, as every woman knows. They are usually supported by numbers of wives, mistresses, mothers, daughters, secretaries, nurses, and others. ... Thus, there is reason to question whether this model accurately reflects men's lives. Its goals, however, are held out for all, and are seen as the preconditions for mental health" (437).

<sup>2</sup>Scholars in a number of disciplines have commented on women's experience of time as cyclical rather than linear, often in connection with their experience of domesticity. In *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, theologian Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi writes, "Though we know better, we often act as though linear, quantifiable time (associated with questing) were given in nature. ... Though our subjective experiences of time vary, nonetheless we tend to assume that there is some sort of temporal sequence 'out there,' apart from

ourselves. This kind of time that we assume is 'out there' we describe as historic, meaning that it is progressive and nonrepeatable, having a forward motion like the flow of a river ... it is useful to see how a rough distinction between linear and mythic time reflects differences in traditional masculine and feminine time experiences. Women's housebound time is typically characterized by amorphousness or circularity or both ..." (145-46). In *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*, Bettina Aptheker describes women's lives as "fragmented and dispersed," "episodic," ... "they are often determined by events outside of women's control. ... Women are continually interrupted" (39). In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, sociologist Nancy Chodorow writes that women's domestic activities have a "nonbounded quality. They consist, as countless housewives can attest and as women poets, novelists, and feminist theorists have described, of diffuse obligations ... the work of maintenance and reproduction is characterized by its repetitive and routine continuity, and does not involve a specified sequence of progression" (179).

<sup>3</sup>In *Women and Spirituality*, Carol Ochs points out that the concept of spiritual quest as a flight from domestic and communal life pervades Western theology as well as psychology and literature: "The image of the journey permeates the classics of Western spirituality. The notion of a journey with a well-marked itinerary permeates psychology as well ... both presuppose a linear progression with later stages that are valued more highly than earlier ones. ... The adoption of the journey model carries with it the view that part of our life has value and meaning only insofar as it contributes to the goal of the journey. Living in itself is not considered intrinsically valuable--the only value is in the goal we supposedly long to achieve" (24). This emphasis on quest in patriarchal theology has resulted in a "landscape of the sacred" in which, theologian Elizabeth Dodson Gray writes, only "[a] few places, a few people, a few occasions are seen to concentrate and to embody the holy ... The only moments in time which become hallowed by an aura of holiness are those which involve these places, these people, these texts and these acts. The rest of life is perceived as a vast desert of the mundane, the unholy" (2).

While traditional Western theology tends to view sacred experience as separate from ordinary, earthly experience, feminist theology emphasizes the presence of the sacred embodied in earthly experience. Feminist theology views personal experience not as trivial or mundane, but as an authoritative source of spiritual revelation. Unlike patriarchal theology, which establishes a few places and activities as realms of the sacred, feminist theology locates the sacred in ordinary experience. The root of theology, feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether writes in *Sexism and God-Talk*, is "codified collective human experience ... Experience includes experience of the divine, experience of oneself, and experience of the community and the world, in an interacting dialectic" (12). Traditional theologies, however, have dismissed those who create their own religious myths as heretics. "Theologians are ignorant of what every anthropologist knows," Naomi Goldenberg writes, "--i.e., that the forms of our thought derive from the forms of our culture" (115). Feminist theologians are thus distinctive in recognizing what Ruether terms "codified, collective human experience" as an authoritative source of spiritual truth. The fact that the kinds of experiences that have been "collected" and "codified" in Western culture have been almost exclusively male, however, has resulted in a male-centered theology. If women's daily lives are radically different from those of men, then their perceptions of divinity and transcendence will be shaped by those experiences, emerging as a distinctively female spirituality.

## Works Cited

Aptheker, Bettina. *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1989.

Baym, Nina. "Melodramas of Beset Manhood: How Theories of American Fiction Exclude Women Authors." *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Pantheon, 1985. 63-80.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1978.

Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster*. 1987. New York: Vintage, 1990.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Goldenberg, Naomi. *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions*. Boston: Beacon P, 1979.

Gray, Elizabeth Dodson. *Sacred Dimensions of Women's Experience*. Wellesley: Roundtable P, 1988.

Levy, Helen Fiddymont. *Fiction of the Home Place: Jewett, Cather, Glasow, Porter, Welty, and Naylor*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993.

Lewis, R. W. B. *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1955.

Miller, Jean Baker. *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. Boston: Beacon P, 1976.

Ochs, Carol. *Women and Spirituality*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983.

Rabuzzi, Kathryn Allen. *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*. New York: Seabury P, 1982.

Romines, Ann. *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992.

Ruether, Rosemary. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. Boston: Beacon P, 1983

Twain, Mark [Samuel Clemens]. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Ed. Henry Nash Smith. Boston: Houghton, 1958.

Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1929.

**Source Citation:** Groover, Kristina K. "Re-visioning the Wilderness: *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *Ellen Foster*." Southern Quarterly. 37.3-4 (1999, Spring) 187-197. **Rpt. in** Contemporary Literary Criticism. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 145. Detroit: Gale Group, 2001. 187-197. Literature Resource Center. Gale. Council Rock High School South. 14 Oct. 2008  
<<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=holl83564>>.

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|H1100036787

Although Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn* two decades after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, America—and especially the South—was still struggling with racism and the aftereffects of slavery. By the early 1880s, Reconstruction, the plan to put the United States back together after the war and integrate freed slaves into society, had hit shaky ground, although it had not yet failed outright. As Twain worked on his novel, race relations, which seemed to be on a positive path in the years following the Civil War, once again became strained. The imposition of Jim Crow laws, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (or, in more recent editions, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*) is a novel by Mark Twain, first published in the United Kingdom in December 1884 and in the United States in February 1885. Commonly named among the Great American Novels, the work is among the first in major American literature to be written throughout in vernacular English, characterized by local color regionalism. It is told in the first person by Huckleberry "Huck" Finn, the narrator of two other Twain