
Susan J. Rosowski. *Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. 242p.

Laura Hamblin
Utah Valley State College

Susan J. Rosowski, the Adele Hall Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Nebraska and editor of *Cather Studies*, here argues against Frederick Jackson Turner's prototypical and masculine frontier thesis that narratives of the American West address the experience of Europeans, moved to the edge of civilization, confronting wilderness and dangerous natives. The conflict, essential in the prototype, is one between civilization and nature and relies on character traits of rugged individualism and national notions of Manifest Destiny. According to Rosowski, traditional Western narratives utilize birthing metaphors; however, the narratives typically usurp the birthing process from female creativity, resulting in the hero conquering the land. The hero, through domination, transforms the land into the New America, and is transformed into the New Adam. Hallmarks of the Western include a hostility toward language, violence (especially towards indigenous peoples, women, and nature), and divisive premises of discourse (subject/object, hunter/prey, male/female, etc.). Rosowski challenges Turner's American myth by looking at the writing of four female authors: Margaret Fuller (chapter 1), Willa Cather (chapters 2-4), Jean Stafford (chapters 5-7), and Marilynne Robinson (chapter 9). Rosowski suggests that each of these female authors ultimately "probes the frontier plot of opposition and, exposing the violence at its heart, discards the plot" (197), replacing the traditional masculine narrative with one of relationship, community and conversation — qualities which reinforce a more healthy social reciprocity rooted in language. Rosowski's writing is well researched (with over 29 pages of notes and works cited) and would be valuable in interdisciplinary courses of study including literature, history, cultural and American studies, gender studies, and genre studies.

The introduction establishes the tradition which Rosowski is revisiting, tying the tradition to America's Judeo-Christian and ancient Greek heritage and expounding on the tradition as reinforced through John Knapp, Henry David Thoreau and the transcendentalists, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Owen Wister, and Zane Gray. Chapter 1 looks at Margaret Fuller's writing, specifically *Summer*, which Rosowski sees as inviting women to participate in the conversation of the West, weaving together a community of voices. Fuller takes the American principle of independence, and genders it in her encouragement of women to be independent from men. In many respects, Fuller sets the standard for the female

response to the West on which the other writers expound. Chapter 2, “The Long Foreground to Cather’s West,” is fascinating, utilizing New Historical criticism in its study of personal letters written among Cather’s extended family (with the aid of a genealogical chart to keep the individuals straight) to establish the milieu out of which Cather grew and wrote. Chapters 3 and 4 review a number of Cather stories, most heavily *My Antonia* and *O Pioneers!* as these texts deal with women who defy convention and follow the passion of their true natures. Cather’s language celebrates domestic work, claiming wilderness and nature for her female characters. Through Cather, the birth of the nation is not the result of separation, rather it affirms analogies and continuities. Chapters 5 through 7 address Jean Stafford’s writing. These chapters rely heavily on plot summary, as do (to a lesser degree) some of the chapters on Cather. Rosowski sees Stafford’s stories as challenging “the destiny of anatomy [which] prescribes women to the narcissistic, masochistic, and passive roles of sentimentalism” (111), thus redefining the boundaries for the female *Bildungsroman*. Stafford’s stories expose the violence inherent in the Western myth and the hostility to women and language. For Stafford, conception, generation, and creativity are made possible through language. Chapter 8, “The Western Hero as Logos,” gives additional information, which seems to me to belong with the introduction as it articulates the nature of language in traditional Westerns. The chapter comes after the discussions of Fuller, Cather, and Stafford, and before the discussion of Robinson, but the ideas Rosowski presents — that the language itself in Westerns is as “wild and lawless as the country” (159) and that traditional Western heroes tend to withdraw from language, preferring instead the “purity of seeing” (168) as an act of silencing which creates linguistic regression that “denies generativity, and excludes procreativity” (173) — could be valuable in one’s readings of Fuller, Cather, and Stafford. Ultimately, because the Western hero is concerned with power rather than with spirituality, language becomes a means of power, resulting in despotism. The ideas which Rosowski here presents are wonderfully intriguing and important, so much so that they seem to belong with the original introduction rather than as an afterthought to Fuller, Cather, and Stafford, and as a transition to Robinson. The final chapter deals with Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* wherein Robinson transforms the Western into a meditative tradition — including memory, analysis, and understanding — so as “to return the United States to the global community and to develop a polity of responsibility to the planet” (191).

One troublesome issue I found myself returning to is the complex nature of defining the genre of the Western. If the Western is a narrative of place (stories taking place west of the Mississippi), then Fuller’s work seems not to belong, as

Fuller only traveled to the Milwaukee and Wisconsin Territories and to Mackinaw Island of the Great Lakes. If the Western deals with narratives of a certain time period (before the 1860s), then much of Cather's and Stafford's writing and all of Robinson's writing would be excluded. If the Western is a narrative of a certain plot structure/formula, then none of the female authors would be considered Western writers, but rather anti-Western authors. And if the Western is a narrative of westward movement, then *Housekeeping* would not be included, as ultimately, Sylvie and Ruth move *from* the West to the world at large. A chapter, or a section, concerning the fluid nature of the genre itself would have been helpful for me, as I would not have found myself distracted in my mentally arguing against some assumptions which seem inherent in Rosowski's thesis.

Ultimately, Rosowski's thesis also could be strengthened by setting the four female authors she addresses in a larger context of female Western writers. As it is, without a background of Western writers, one could come from the book thinking that these are the only female Western writers to be found or that they are the only four writers who challenge the Western myth. Rosowski does admit that these four are not necessarily representative as they are all white, educated women. An additional study would be interesting, tying these four writers to minority Western writers, analyzing and comparing narratives from the perspective of Native American and Chicana writers.