

ANALYSIS BY CHAPTER

Housekeeping (1980)



Marilynne Robinson

(1943-)

1

Housekeeping was awarded the PEN/Faulkner Prize for Fiction, was listed by *Time* magazine as one of the “100 Best English-Language Novels from 1923 to 2005,” and was named by the *Guardian Unlimited* as one of the 100 greatest novels of all time.

The opening style is straightforward, expressing the character of the narrator—unpretentious, natural, and honest—the antithesis of ironical dissociated Postmodernist narrators since the 1960s. Here simplicity is purity of soul. “My name is Ruth” is not a displacement like “Call me Ishmael” opening the pursuit of Truth in *Moby-Dick*—Ruth *is* Truth. Her name means sympathy, pity, friend and she discovers the Truth in herself by following her Aunt Sylvie. Robinson begins in a style of commonplace Realism, establishing the reliability of Ruth as a narrator with an objective tone. Gradually her style and symbolism transcend the commonplace, endowing her Realism with a spiritual quality to which William Dean Howells aspired, as leader of the Realist movement in the 19th century, but never attained. This numinous spiritual quality is a Modernist characteristic of *holistic realism* exemplified by Frost, Cather, Anderson, Hemingway, Faulkner, Porter, and Welty. Robinson has said that “There is a visionary quality to all experience”; and “Ordinary things have always seemed numinous to me.”

Ruth’s first sentence conveys that in childhood she and her younger sister Lucille lost those who cared for them and were abandoned by maiden aunts who “fled”—making names ironic—Lily and Foster. We wonder what happened to their parents. Her grandfather built their house “for” her grandmother, indicating competence, diligence, generosity, and a good marriage. He was a Methodist who “wore a necktie and suspenders even to hunt wildflowers.” Though her grandmother had criticisms of his independent nature she looked forward to their reunion in the afterlife. This example implies that back in the 19th century the Victorian paradigm of gender roles functioned to the benefit of women. “He had grown up in the Middle West, in a house dug out of the ground,” like many white pioneers—as in *O Pioneers!* (1913) by Cather—

and like many Indians. His prospects there were low, “with windows just at earth level.” He broadened his mind and horizon by reading and developed his sensibility by painting mountains.

One spring her grandfather “quit his subterranean house, walked to the railroad, and took a train west,” headed for real mountains. Americans have always aspired westward. In American literature the West connotes freedom, opportunity, hope and the future—the American Dream. Her grandfather enacted an allegory of individuation both personal and national—expanded consciousness, more prospects, spiritual elevation, and a raised standard of living. The railroad, traditional symbol of Progress, takes him to the mountains, where he works for the railroad at night “carrying a lamp.” The allegory of his enlightenment and rise in the world adds another dimension to Realism that is characteristic of Modernism.

The town of Fingerbone is high in the forested mountains of Idaho, named after the Indian tribe that still lives there and participates in parades on the Fourth of July. Its little size emphasizes the vulnerability of civilization to Nature, like the open boat in Stephen Crane’s story, “with a black wilderness that stretched away from Fingerbone on every side.” The house her grandfather built for her grandmother on wages from the railroad “was at the edge of town on a little hill,” elevated above serious damage from floods. All is well in the family until a gothic accident. On a dark “moonless night” with her grandfather among its passengers, the train derailed and slid off the local trestle bridge into the lake “like a weasel sliding off a rock.” The simile implies a natural event, but also a world governed by chance and deterministic forces in the literary tradition of Naturalism.

A fingerbone is only a part of a whole skeleton, but as a figure of speech—*synecdoche*—it points to the whole. Fingerbone is a representative human community and its primary concerns are universal, again in the tradition of Realism. People here live close to the bone. Fingerbone Lake “is permeated by sunlight and sustains green life and innumerable fish,” but at bottom is death: “One is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the depths of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below.” The derailment of Progress does not correspond to any single historical event, such as the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. Avoiding specific reference allows the derailment to function as a generalized metaphor that is both historical and psychological: Derailments recur in the economy, in social progress, and in the lives of individuals such as Ruth and her family.

Ruth’s grandmother was maternal and enjoyed nurturing her children—Molly, Helen, and Sylvie. “She had always known a thousand ways to circle them all around with what must have seemed like grace. She knew a thousand songs.” Without the dead grandfather, the female household is somewhat comparable to that in *Little Women*. “With him gone they were cut free from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement.” Because he provided a house and financial security, they can afford to live entirely pastoral lives. They are so happy, the style becomes rhapsodic as Ruth compares their domestic world to “heaven.” But the daughters grow up. Influenced by her mother’s admiration for missionaries, Molly goes off to work for a missionary society in China. Helen marries somebody named Reginald Stone. “I have no memory of this man at all,” says Ruth. Sylvie marries somebody name Fisher. “One year my grandmother had three quiet daughters and the next year the house was empty.”

The grandmother “had never really wished to feel married to anyone” yet she loved her husband, “loved him best, as a soul all unaccompanied, like her own.” Sylvie and Ruth most take after their independent grandparents. They seem to share the conclusion of the grandmother that “love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate.” Nevertheless, the grandmother loved her children without expectation of return. “Her love for them was utter and equal, her government of them generous and absolute.” Although the stoical grandmother cared for her children “very well...she had never taught them to be kind to her.” She never taught them to love.

Ruth identifies Helen with the romantic Helen of Troy, who got carried away, precipitating a war. Helen allowed herself to be “carried off” (or carried him off) and “set up housekeeping in Seattle with this Stone.” His name suggests his possible emotional limitations, while hers are implied by her having never learned how to love. The two young sisters can only infer why their parents’ marriage derailed. Since Helen was implicitly unkind to her own mother, and was capable of abandoning her own children, she may have been unkind to her husband as well—from the start. Since the girls do not know their father at all, he must have

left their mother when they were very young. In the two photographs of him he is self-effacing rather than assertive, perhaps lacking the masculine virtues of the pioneering grandfather: “Clearly he does not consider himself the subject of either photograph. In one he is looking at my mother, who is speaking to Sylvie... In the other he appears to be grooming the dents in the crown of his hat”—as if already preparing to leave--while Helen, Sylvie and the grandmother are looking at the camera.

Helen sold cosmetics in a Seattle drugstore and they lived in a depressing apartment where they ate at a cardgame table. Impulsive marriage is risky and she had married Stone in Nevada, a place iconic for quick marriages, gambling and losing. After seven and a half years of struggle Helen returned to the house in Fingerbone on a Sunday when she knew her mother would be in church. She abandoned her two little girls with a box of graham crackers and drove off a cliff into the lake. Her mother “did not reflect on the unkindness of her children.” She derived strength all her life from her own ability to sacrifice and to love and from her faith in God. Unlike her pioneering mother, Helen cannot cope. Without spiritual resources, she sinks like a stone. The decline in character of generations following the pioneers is likewise a major theme of Willa Cather, especially in *A Lost Lady*.

2

The death of the grandmother is so understated it is evidence that, as with her daughters, she could not teach Ruth and Lucille how to love: “my grandmother one winter morning eschewed awakening.” The word “eschewed” is a wintry abstraction that evokes both the stoicism of the grandmother and the stoicism of Ruth and Lucille. There is no evidence that the girls felt anything in response to losing their last immediate relative. Having already lost their grandfather and their mother, they are growing up unable to form normal human attachments in a world as unreliable as the train that carried their grandfather off the bridge to the bottom of the lake. However, Ruth has a dream that she is walking on the frozen lake when it starts breaking up as it does in the Spring—the season of rebirth—revealing “hands and arms and upturned faces” like spirits of the dead rising up from the bottom. Because her body does not sink through the ice like a stone, Ruth is moved by the dream to the Platonic belief that “my grandmother had entered into some other element upon which our lives floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections are in water.” Her dream gives her an intimation of an afterlife.

Her great-aunts Lily and Nona “were fetched from Spokane and took up housekeeping in Fingerbone, just as my grandmother had wished.” They are distant relatives, sisters-in-law of the grandmother who are her opposites in character. Unmarried and inexperienced, they are alarmed by the responsibility of having to care for children. They are accustomed “to living below ground,” like the grandfather before he set out for the wilderness and built his house in the mountains. But they are timid creatures who dislike leaving their basement hotel room. The virginal Lily and her virtual twin Nona (*No-naw*) are so much alike they are comical. They are both hard of hearing and the ongoing consensus between them is compared to communication in a “termite castle.” This does not bode well for their communication with teenage girls. The brevity and consistent agreement of their statements dramatizes how completely they are of one mind. In their dialogue who is speaking is not specified because it does not matter since they think and act the same, as when “Someone filled the teapot.” These mutually dependent sisters conform to each other in every way, contrasting with the extreme diversity and independence of the other sisters in the family—Molly, Helen, Sylvie, and Ruth and Lucille.

Lily and Nona refer to Sylvie disapprovingly as a migrant worker and express the common prejudices of their society. They resent Helen for imposing a burden on them by abandoning her children, who are “Not as pretty as Helen was.” After they go to bed Ruth and Lucille get up and look out the window at the winter sky in the light of a “bright moon.” They stay up all night because Lucille is having nightmares. Lily and Nona “were not in the habit of cooking” and “never learned to play.” They “enjoyed nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day in the next. This was not to be achieved in Fingerbone...where Lucille and I perpetually threatened to cough or outgrow our shoes.” Afraid of Nature, Lily and Nona even dislike snow, terrified it could make the house fall down.

In contrast, the young girls thrive in the Wilderness. They skate and play on the frozen lake with their neighbors and romping dogs in a pastoral scene of social harmony. They are bold like their grandparents, skating out to the edge of the swept ice “to its farthest edge.” They brave “the bitter darkness,” possibly

skating over their mother's and their grandfather's bones. When they finally return home, their great-aunts explain with alarm that they cannot go out looking for the girls because "We might get lost, or fall down in the road." The old ladies are relieved to hand over the burden of caregiving to Sylvie, the aunt of whom they previously disapproved as a "drifter." The unmarried ladies decide that Sylvie's drifting, "properly considered, might be no more than a preference for the single life."

Ironically, the grandmother disowned Sylvie, omitting her name "from virtually all conversation, and from her will." She "had very little patience with people who chose not to marry." And she said so to Lily and Nona, "Many a time." Actually, we learn, Sylvie did marry but "simply chose not to act married," which might explain why her husband left her.

3

Nona answers the knock on the door "rustling with all the slippery frictions of her old woman's clothing and underclothing." The phrase "rustling with all the slippery frictions" is poetic (onomatopoeia), adds a sound effect to the Realism and in reference to "underclothing" evokes concealed temperamental frictions evident in her conversations with Lily.

Sylvie returns to Fingerbone after 16 years, estranged from her dead mother and her missing husband. The great-aunts (who are not so great) remember her as "too dreaming and self-absorbed." This is ironic since the aunts are so self-absorbed. The reference to dreaming associates Sylvie with the dream Ruth had of being a spirit floating above the collapsing ice of the lake, transcending death. Sylvie enters the kitchen "with a quiet that seemed compounded of gentleness and stealth and self-effacement." Her shyness recalls the photos of her father. About 35 years old, she wears no socks and a raincoat she must have found on a bench. "Nothing could induce vanity in her." Sylvie is a transient spirit. Ruth says that she "put her icy hand on my head," identifying her with the ice breaking up and melting on the lake. Spirits are associated with cold, like those Ruth saw in her dream. Sylvie is cold, but growing warm in the house. Under the raincoat she is wearing a shiny "deep green" dress, the color of renewal and growth, and a brooch—"a little bunch of lilies." Whereas Aunt Lily seems to be spiritually dead and appropriate at a funeral, the lilies of Sylvie the drifter suggest various possibilities of resurrection.

Ruth imagines Sylvie approaching the house down the road "*narrowed* by the banks of plowed snow on either side, and *narrowed* more by the slushy pools... How must it have seemed to step into the *narrow* hallway... Sylvie's bedroom was really a sort of *narrow* dormer... She went into the *narrow* room..." [italics added] She has narrowed her life for the sake of the children. Her "borrowed-looking dress" is too formal for her and she is uncomfortable in the maternal role, but unlike Lily and Nona who likewise are childless, she is not afraid. She has "the placid modesty of a virgin who has conceived." This comparison of Sylvie to the mother of Jesus suggests that she is a potential medium of salvation for the little girls. When on the contrary it appears to the girls that she might decide not to stay, "we were ready to perform great feats of docility to keep her." And indeed, Sylvie may leave at any time: "I like to travel by train... I'll take you with me sometime." The sense of life's unpredictable fluidity Sylvie fosters in the girls is the opposite of the grounded feeling of stability her mother, the grandmother, Sylvia Foster fostered. Ruth foresees a future with Sylvie: "I saw the three of us posed in all the open doors of an endless train of freight cars... identical images that produced a flickering illusion of both movement and stasis."

Sylvie tells the girls their mother Helen was pretty, quiet, talented, and fond of cats—independent feminine animals not known for love or fidelity. They learn that their father was shy like them, that he traveled like Sylvie, and that apparently he once tried with a "thick letter" to reconcile with Helen and the girls but she tore up the letter without reading it. Helen and Sylvie have been differentiated as characters but Ruth now says "as I watched Sylvie, she reminded me of my mother more and more. There was such similarity, in fact, in the structure of cheek and chin, and the texture of hair, that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it." The displacement of the suicidal Helen by the survivor Sylvie as a mother figure may save the girls' lives. Helen sold cosmetics, Sylvie is indifferent to how she looks. Appearances, such as housekeeping, do not matter to Sylvie. Unlike her sister, Helen did keep house and have children, but she abandoned them irresponsibly. Now, ironically, it is the free spirit among the sisters who must become responsible.

To the girls, trains have an ominous association with death since one slid off the bridge and drowned their grandfather. Under the influence of Sylvie the traveler, however, they begin to watch passing trains. They even follow one along the tracks through deep snow and see a young woman through a window of the train with a brightly painted face, wearing bracelets and gray gloves. This image affects Ruth so deeply that she dreams of the young woman going somewhere in the train, identifying with her. Throughout the novel dreams are identified with the spirit. Ruth dreams of traveling on a train in comfort, wearing gloves, not riding in dirty freight cars like Sylvie. And “in the dream the bridge pilings do not tremble so perilously under the weight of the train.”

The girls are so alert to abandonment that when Sylvie leaves the house to take a walk Lucille declares, “She isn’t coming back,” and Ruth says, “I bet Lily and Nona told her to leave.” They go look for Sylvie in the cold through a world of frozen slush and sharp ice. Ruth consoles her sister but Lucille is mad. They follow Sylvie to the railroad station where she says, “Oh, I just came in here to get warm.” Lucille asks her why she does not wear gloves and Sylvie says she left them on the train. She decides to stay “for awhile... I think it’s best for now, at least.” Then she buys a pair of cheap gray gloves, a role model for deciding to stay, in contrast to the young woman in Ruth’s dreams who is going away.

At the end of the chapter Lucille, no longer angry, fibs to Lily and Nona in order to take all the blame for going out with Ruth in the snow unkempt and improperly dressed: “We went clear downtown. Sylvie was worried, so she came looking for us.” Lucille’s self-sacrifice is a response to Sylvie’s, and is evidence that Sylvie is having a redemptive influence upon the girls. Of course Sylvie is giving up her freedom, if only temporarily, whereas the girls are getting rid of Lily and Nona.

4

Fingerbone is “chastened by an outsized landscape and extravagant weather.” In American literature of small towns like Spoon River and Winesburg the locale is pastoral, whereas Fingerbone is set in an alpine wilderness. The vulnerability of Fingerbone and its people represents the true subordination of civilization to Nature, like the open boat in Stephen Crane’s famous story. The girls build a snow figure like “a woman standing in a cold wind”—but her head falls off. That seems to describe Sylvie at times. Then melting snow and rain flood Fingerbone and Nature asserts its dominance. That spring for the first time ever “water poured over the thresholds and covered the floor to the depth of four inches.” Chance as in card games is a traditional motif in Naturalistic fiction, as in Crane’s “The Blue Hotel” and *The Red Badge of Courage*. Throughout this flood chapter, Sylvie plays cards, mostly solitaire. Asked why she never had children she answers, “It just wasn’t in the cards.”

In describing the flood Ruth evokes Noah: “The houses and hutches and barns and sheds of Fingerbone were like so many spilled and foundered arks.” Sloshing around in the darkness Sylvie marvels, “It’s like the end of the world!” They wade in boots and “The house flowed around us.” The title *Housekeeping*, ostensibly a domestic novel in the Victorian tradition (as if by Lily and Nona), is increasingly ironic as so little “housekeeping” is done or even possible. The more significant meaning of the title becomes keeping the house as in holding on to it, for shelter and familial unity. With a full pantry Sylvie is content even in a flooded house: “What could be better?” She lights a candle and plays solitaire. On the other hand Lucille is lonely: “I’m very tired of it’.” Then “in a very loud voice, ‘I’m really tired of this’.” Ruth worries, “Lucille and I still doubted that Sylvie would stay. She resembled our mother, and besides that, she seldom removed her coat, and every story she told had to do with a train or a bus station.”

Sylvie tells the girls about a woman devoted to her little girl who had her taken away by the court. Ruth imagines life with Sylvie as a “wild waltz” and anticipates that in the end the court will take her away from Sylvie. “Such a separation, I imagined, could indeed lead to loneliness intense enough to make one conspicuous in bus stations.” These are hints that, as a drifter, Sylvie has already had a little girl taken away from her by the court. She gives the girls the impression that she has never had a child but refuses to discuss whether she wanted to have one. Sylvie does appear incapable in a traditional female role. In the darkness she mistakes one girl for the other: “I’m not Lucille,’ I said.” On the other hand, in her masculine independence Sylvie rides the rails, survives the elements, drives off a pack of wild dogs, throws rocks with accuracy, makes fires and warms the house.

Ruth finds Sylvie in the darkness of the grandmother's lower room, flooded by grief and unresponsive. "Then I drew back my arm and hit her across the middle. The blow landed among the folds of her coat with a dull whump." The several times that Ruth hits somebody, usually Lucille, bring her to life and are funny because so unexpected, improper, and harmless. They add punch to the occasional drollery in the narration. Even Sylvie thinks Ruth's punching her is funny: "She laughed, 'Why did you do that?'" The child admonishes the adult: "Well, why won't you talk?" Ruth pulls Sylvie by her coat up out of the dark flooded room and all the way up the steps of recovery in a scene dramatizing how Ruth is saving her savior, how Sylvie needs Ruth as much as the girl needs her.

Everyone, whether they know it or not, is a transient spirit—essentially a drifter: "Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not to buy...and the spirit passes on, just as the wind..." The ephemeral brevity of life makes Sylvie's indifferent housekeeping ironic when she tells visiting neighbors who admire the "order of our household" that "I would ask you to sit down...but the couch is full of water."

5

Sylvie's life is full of water, as in fluid, unpredictable--of the nature of Nature. When the girls become truants, Sylvie does not notice and drifts around the lake, her most natural element, looking not for the girls but at the scenery. "We found her obliviousness irksome." When they see her walk out onto the bridge, along with them the reader wonders if Sylvie is going to jump—abandoning the girls again as their mother did. "We still did not know otherwise."

They walk Sylvie home in dismay: "If you fell in, everyone would think you did it on purpose," Lucille said. "Even us." Sylvie apologizes for upsetting them but does not reassure them that she would never kill herself, sustaining our suspense. In the middle of the night they hear her singing, find her playing solitaire and standing out in the orchard. "Clearly our aunt was not a stable person." They listen for her at night the way people listen for spirits. Ruth imagines her drowning herself out of curiosity, just to find out what it would be like. Sylvie carries a broom around the house while allowing leaves to gather in corners of the rooms and moves the grandmother's old davenport out into the front yard. She turns the inside out and lets the outside in. Leaving windows and doors open, Sylvie surrenders to Nature. "Thus finally did our house become attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of weather, even in the first days of Sylvie's housekeeping. Thus did she begin by little and perhaps unawares to ready it for wasps and bats and barn swallows. Sylvie talked a great deal about housekeeping." In the classic *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) Crèvecoeur's farmer lives in such pastoral harmony with Nature that he allows wasps to nest in his living room and alight on the eyelids of his children.

Under the influence of Sylvie, who eats with her fingers, the girls get down and dirty. "We spent days on our knees in the garden, digging caves and secret passages with kitchen spoons for our dolls." This compares to their grandfather living underground before he rose in the world and to Lily and Nona in their basement hotel room, who are recalled when the girls enact the recurrent plot of women's literature since the 18th century—"urgent dramas of entrapment and miraculous escape." Sylvie tells them about an old woman friend who escaped by dying in a boxcar: "When she arrived in Wenatchee, the ghost was gone." Among the belongings left by the grandmother is a page with printing on it—"I will make you fishers of men"—a quotation of Christ recruiting disciples. "This document explained my aunt Molly's departure" to do missionary work in China. Sylvie's married name is Fisher, suggesting that in her own very different way she too is a missionary and disciple of Christ.

Ruth draws metaphysical intimations from Nature like Thoreau in *Walden* when she observes gulls and gnats and windblown leaves: "Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added to it a law of completion—that everything must finally be made comprehensible—then some general rescue of the sort I imagined my aunt to have undertaken [in China] would be inevitable. For why do our thoughts turn to some gesture of a hand, the fall of a sleeve, some corner of a room on a particular anonymous afternoon, even when we are asleep, and even when we are so old that our thoughts have abandoned other business? What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?" In his *Notebooks*, Hawthorne persuades himself of immortality with much the same combination of experience, intuition and reason.

The sisters diverge, as Ruth is “content with Sylvie” whereas Lucille wants to escape her as from a “slowly sinking boat.” This again identifies Sylvie with water, the lake in particular. Lucille is solid and practical, Sylvie fluid and fanciful. Lucille “was of the common persuasion” and is always looking ahead, whereas Sylvie, making the most of every moment, “inhabited a millennial present.”

6

Ruth is drawn to the sensibility of Sylvie [*sylvan*, one who dwells in the woods, common name for a shepherdess], whereas “I had begun to sense that Lucille’s loyalties were with the other world.” Sylvie likes to sit in the dark, whereas Lucille [to bring light, to shine] pulls a chain and floods the room with glaring light, exposing the faults in their shabby environment. Her light is materialistic. Lucille is “dispiriting.” She brings Sylvie down when she bluntly asks, “Where’s your husband, Sylvie?” The “other world” of Ruth is spiritual, as when she remembers that “our grandfather still lay in a train that had slid to the lake floor long before we were born. Perhaps we all awaited a resurrection.”

The girls spend their last summer together in the woods and at the lake, with an echo of Walden Pond. One of Thoreau’s most famous lines pertains to his motive for going to live in the woods. Ruth says, “I went to the woods for the woods’ own sake, while, increasingly, Lucille seemed to be enduring a banishment there.” Fingerbone Lake is comparable to Walden Pond in reflecting the narrator’s psyche or soul. The metaphor of Sylvie as a mermaid is hyperbole for union with Nature. “Sylvie in a house was more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin. She preferred it sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic.”

Sylvie reveals that she is married and avoiding her husband, but Lucille distrusts and does not believe her. With respect to relations with husbands in this novel, the iceberg principle of Hemingway applies. This technique of withholding information avoids blaming on the basis of gender. “There were other things about Sylvie’s housekeeping that bothered Lucille.” Her habits such as sleeping in her clothes “were clearly the habits of a transient. They offended Lucille’s sense of propriety.... Lucille hated everything that had to do with transience.” On the contrary, Ruth is reassured by Sylvie’s “sleeping on the lawn, and now and then in the car... It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave.” Lucille is embarrassed even just hearing about the “trashy people” Sylvie has befriended. “Lucille was at this time an intermediary between Sylvie and those demure but absolute arbiters who continually sat in judgment of our lives.”

The inability of Helen to raise two children alone is contrasted to her mother, the grandmother who raised three, and to “a woman in Oklahoma who lost an arm in an aircraft factory, but who still manages to support six children by giving piano lessons.” Also in contrast to the robust Oklahoma mother, Ruth feels insubstantial: “I often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent, in fact. It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares. But my allusion to this feeling of ghostliness sounded peculiar, and sweat started all over my body, convicting me on the spot of gross corporality.” Ruth wants to know whether Sylvie “too, felt ghostly, as I imagined she must.... I feared and suspected that Sylvie and I were of a kind.”

When the two return home, Lucille is housekeeping “in a tumult of cleaning, with the lights on, although it was not evening yet. ‘Now we find you asleep on a *bench!*’ she shouted.” So, without a word, Sylvie leaves. “‘She always does that. She just wanders away.’ Lucille picked up her dish towel and threw it at the front door.... ‘I think she’d really rather jump on a train.’” No doubt. Nevertheless, sacrificing her preference, Sylvie returns to housekeeping. She does not want to feel responsible should one of the girls follow the suicidal example of their mother. Cheerfully, she makes huckleberry pancakes and compares the girls to herself and their mother when they played the same geography game and picked huckleberries at the railroad station. “We used to go to that same place when we were little girls.... We were close then, like you two.” The girls are contrasting types, like female versions of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn--on a lake rather than a river.

Their mother Helen was a housekeeper. “Our mother swept and dusted, kept our anklets white, and fed us vitamins.” Lucille thinks her mother was “orderly, vigorous, and sensible” like herself. Contrary to the evidence she chooses to imagine that her father is dead and that her mother “was killed in an accident.” She does not face the truth like Ruth, who thinks her mother “tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone—she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned.” This implies that she also abandoned her husband. Like her own mother, the grandmother Sylvia Foster, she did not foster love.

Now living with Sylvie Fisher, the girls go fishing and hunt for huckleberries. The lake is “quick with small life, like any pond,” but much larger and darker than Walden Pond: “The water seemed spread over half the world...the lake was vast, and in league with the moon.” Vast enough to have tides and dark at the bottom, littered with bones and haunted by spirits. Fingerbone Lake is like a skeleton pointing toward death. Water is a traditional religious symbol and fishing is a metaphor of reaching down for something in the depths of the psyche, as in Hemingway’s “Big Two-Hearted River.” The first disciples of Christ were fishermen and the fish was a recognition symbol among the early persecuted Christians.

They fish in a sheltered bay: “It was a place of distinctly domestic disorder, warm and still and replete.” The only housekeeping required is gutting perch with their thumbnails, building a fire, and cooking the fish like Indians. Like males they enact “rituals of predation.” Still, “the woods at night terrified us.” They build a shelter and spend the night among the various creatures there. It is not a romantic experience: “There was no moon.” Lucille is frightened of the wild, throws rocks at dark shapes she cannot identify and complains that Nature is not conforming to her expectations, “never still, never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun.” As in the flooding of their house. Young Lucille has not yet learned what Ishmael learned from Ahab’s defeat by the white whale—that Nature prevails.

Ruth infers that all human life is illusory in that “Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings.” In Vedantic philosophy and Hinduism this illusory facade is called “maya.” Ruth now feels as her mother may have felt, that “only the darkness could be perfect and permanent,” that “Darkness is the only solvent.” Her dark night of the soul is a spiritual death. In the morning the girls’ long trek home is such an ordeal that Ruth falls asleep at the kitchen table: “So this is all death is, I thought.” Her night as a transient in the Wilderness has been hellish and Sylvie helps her recover with “brimstone tea.” Ruth “began to hope for oblivion, and then I rolled out of my chair.” Unconcerned about such a little fall, Sylvia asks her, “Did you have a good sleep?”

An American Eve still falling after all these years, Ruth dreams that she is still waiting for her mother to return. And perhaps she has. For Ruth is comforted by a “sense of a presence unperceived”—which is perhaps the spirit of her mother. Meanwhile she has begun to stop listening to Lucille and to act like Sylvie. “You’re going to leave,” Lucille says, then insists, “We have to *improve* ourselves!” After all, improvement is the whole purpose of civilization and the meaning of America, personified in their grandfather who built their house. However, Lucille is not building for others, she is making clothes for herself, preoccupied with appearances and “the way one was supposed to look.” She wants to join and rise in society, whereas Ruth and Sylvie are independent souls--what in *Moby-Dick* are called “isolatoes.” Lucille dreams that Sylvie is trying to smother her, an ironic reversal of their personalities.

Their unkempt house is returning to Nature, overtaken by the lawn. “And it seemed that if the house were not to founder, it must soon begin to float.” This extends the metaphor of Sylvie as a mermaid in a ship’s cabin. When the girls find pressed flowers in one of their grandfather’s books, Lucille wants to burn them, Ruth to save them. The flowers represent the values of the heart, family, and all that is precious in the past that Ruth wants to preserve. The sisters fight like the Flesh and the Spirit in the poem by Anne Bradstreet (1678). Lucille wins and crushes the flowers, then makes helping her make her new clothes a test of Ruth’s moral character, ironically projecting her own fault: “You just don’t want to help.” So Lucille goes out looking for “someone else who would be useful to her in the same way.” As it turns out Lucille is unable to make clothes for herself without help and burns up her dress in frustration. For centuries the

seamstress had been the icon of true womanhood and housekeeping. The sisters reconcile when Ruth confesses in humility that she is even worse than Lucille at “those things.”

Lucille is determined “to make something of herself,” which assumes she is nothing without society, whereas Ruth “was more the image of Sylvie with every day that passed.” Lucille tells their high school principal that practical things do not matter to Ruth. “She hasn’t figured out what matters to her yet. She likes trees.” We think of Lucille when the principal counsels Ruth, “You’re going to have to learn to speak for yourself, and think for yourself, that’s for sure.” It is ironic that Lucille dominates Ruth, since Lucille is both younger and shorter. Her domination of her sister is a measure of her assertive self-interest and the power of dominant values, Flesh versus Spirit. Robinson has said “I like to be as forgetful of my own physical being as I can be.” Traditionally in literature being tall connotes being elevated in character in a moral or spiritual sense—Faulkner often uses this implication—being older usually connotes being wiser (until the 1960s), and being quiescent connotes being humble.

The ambitious Lucille now avoids Ruth in school and joins “a group of girls who eat lunch in the Home Economics room,” where housekeeping is taught. Though she remains solitary—“I never made a friend in my life”—Ruth is denatured by formal schooling: “I preferred Latin to lunch, and to daydreaming, and I was afraid to go down to the lake alone that autumn.” Society as represented by school does not empower Ruth, it depletes her courage and what Indians call spirit power. In contrast “Sylvie was often at the lake. Sometimes she came home with fish in her pockets.”

Lucille goes to a dance in a dress she made in the sewing room at school. That night she leaves home and moves in with Miss Royce the Home Economics teacher, ironically “a solitary woman, too high-strung to be capable of friendships with children.” Royce recalls the grandmother Sylvia Foster who could not relate to children or foster love, except that she is childless. Miss Royce in effect “adopted” Lucille, Ruth recounts, “and I had no sister after that night.” Lucille’s choice of a surrogate mother also recalls her natural mother Helen, likewise a solitary high-strung woman who abandoned children, except that Miss Royce is so home economical she never married—a type of the liberated woman.

8

Early in the morning Sylvie initiates the spiritual rebirth of Ruth. The girl is sleepy and Sylvie must try to wake her up like Thoreau tried to wake up his neighbors in *Walden* (1854). Ruth follows Sylvie “in my sleep.” By now she identifies with Sylvie so much that “We are the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child.” They borrow a hidden rowboat on the lake and in a birth image, “I crawled under her body and out between her legs.”

Enlightenment is literal as the sun is rising “like a long-legged insect bracing itself out of its chrysalis.” The owner of the rowboat yells and chases and throws rocks at them and Sylvie reveals that she has borrowed his boat on previous occasions. This minor lawbreaking is comparable to Huck and Jim stealing watermelons in dramatizing the conflict between society and the individual quest for freedom. Ruth says “Dawn and its excesses always reminded me of heaven, a place where I have always known I would not be comfortable.” Like Huck, who lost his mother and got Miss Watson instead, Ruth does not feel deserving of heaven and assumes it will be dominated by people like Miss Royce.

In the boat Ruth imagines her grandfather still reclined in his “berth” on the bottom of the lake. He represents the pioneering spirit that built their house, the spirit celebrated by Willa Cather and condemned as imperialistic by Postmodern academics who turned against America during the 1960s. Ruth like Cather hopes that someday the pioneering spirit will be resurrected and reborn. Sylvie shows that she inherited that spirit as she rows Ruth across the lake to the “broad point.” They walk up a valley to a stunted orchard and a fallen house, like a wild deserted Eden. “Sylvie smiled at me. ‘Pretty, isn’t it?’” Like an old abandoned sod house in a Cather novel, this fallen house represents the pioneers who settled here in the 19th century, many of whose ghosts still haunt the place, in particular children.

Waiting for the ghosts of wild children to appear, Ruth is gratified by the wild “vegetable profusion” and feels a sense of *compensation* in the tradition of Emerson: “To crave and to have are as like as a thing

and its shadow.” Ruth finds compensation in sheer desire—even sensory gratification—further evidence to her of an immortal spirit. “And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole.... So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again.” Her idealism here, contrasted to Lucille’s materialism, is just as extreme as Emerson’s at the end of *Nature* (1836).

Sylvie abandons her in the wild to be self-reliant, much as young Indians were sent out on vision quests. In her vision Ruth transforms this place in the Wilderness into a Garden like heaven, where Lot’s barren wife—turned into a pillar of salt—would be redeemed, where “rare flowers would gleam in her hair, and on her breast, and in her hands, and there would be children all around her, to love and marvel at her for her beauty...and they would forgive her, eagerly and lavishly, for turning away... Though her hands were ice and did not touch them, she would be more than mother to them.” Turning away from children is a theme that connects Lot’s wife to Helen, who may be redeeming herself as a spirit in Sylvie. In contrast, Miss Royce is the model preferred by Lucille, who crushed the pressed flowers left by their grandfather. Ruth is sure her mother has “not perished, not perished.”

She emerges from “the valley and down the little apron of earth at its entrance.” Here at this remote place on the lake she is teased by the spirits of the “half-wild, lonely children” like herself. She had ignored them when she was with Lucille, but now, sitting on a log “I knew that if I turned however quickly to look behind me the consciousness behind me would not still be there, and would only come closer when I turned away again. Even if it spoke just at my ear, as it seemed often at the point of doing, when I turned there would be nothing there.” Ruth is so lonely she is attracted to death herself, like her mother: “Let them come unhouse me of this flesh... I would rather be with them”—the ghosts. She anticipates rebirth: “I lay like a seed in a husk.... It was the order of the world that I, the nub, the sleeping germ, should swell and expand....though my first birth had hardly deserved that name, and why should I hope for more from the second? The only true birth would be the final one, which would free us from watery darkness and the thought of watery darkness, but could such a birth be imagined?”

Ruth is haunted by “a thousand images of one gesture, never dispelled but rising always, inevitably, like a drowned woman.” Sylvie rows her to the bridge. While they wait for a train to pass overhead, Ruth imagines her grandmother passing overhead into heaven: “And my grandmother would scan the shores to see how nearly the state of grace resembled the state of Idaho...” Wit and irony express an intellectual detachment in dynamic counterpoint with the poetic Expressionism that immerses the reader in the spiritual experiences and perceptions of Ruth. “The light made a sort of nimbus around Sylvie.” Like a halo. “Sylvie had no awareness of time”—a characteristic of transcendent consciousness.

The train passes over their heads and speeds away, resurrecting the death train in their memories: “‘The train must be just about under us here,’ she said.... ‘Lots of people came in from the hills. It was like the Fourth of July, except that the bunting was black’.” This again makes the grandfather representative of traditional America submerged under the Postmodernist bridge to the 21st century. “The current carried us always toward the bridge...We only seemed to be tethered to the old wreck on the lake floor.” Sylvie identifies with the drowned transients riding in freight cars of the train and makes it a symbol of society: “Everyone rode that train.... All of them sleeping”—in Thoreau’s sense. Hawthorne satirized the popular illusion of an easy way to salvation in his dream allegory “The Celestial Railroad” (1843), an early critique of technology displacing religion in the modern world.

When Ruth takes over the rowing from Sylvie, once again “I crawled between her legs.” She says “My left arm has always been stronger than my right.” The left side of the body is controlled by the right brain, metaphorically the heart, and is associated with spirituality in contrast to the head. “For every two strokes with the oars together I had to take a third with the right oar alone.” Making no progress she stops rowing and “let the current carry us,” like a Taoist. After they beach the rowboat they climb into a boxcar of an eastbound train, joining a transient Indian woman who turns out to be an old friend of Sylvie. After getting lost, they complete a circular journey. Getting lost is one characteristic of individuation in the Wilderness leading to transcendent consciousness, as in Faulkner’s *The Bear* (1939). “‘We could have tied the boat to the bridge,’ Sylvie said. ‘Then we’d have stayed close to town, and we wouldn’t have gotten lost’.” Later she dreams that “Sylvie and I were drifting in the dark, and did not know where we were.”

The earlier flood that made their house part of the lake is compared to the biblical Flood, giving their story a mythic dimension in the tradition of Modernism: "Looking out at the lake one could believe that the Flood had never ended." Since the biblical Flood was a cleansing of evil from the Earth, by analogy this recent flood evokes the decadence of Postmodernism. The virtuous grandfather built his house on a hill that reduced damage from recurrent floods. The Puritans led by John Winthrop in 1630 wanted to make their colony an exemplary "City on a Hill." The bottom of the lake "below is always the accumulated past, which vanishes but does not vanish, which perishes and remains." Going home, they pass "Lucille and her friends...dressed like all the others." She sees "the importance Lucille now placed upon appearances." Lucille tries to talk Ruth into changing her clothes, but Ruth is not listening to her anymore. Lucille bases her argument that Ruth need not stay with Sylvie on "comfort," a middle-class value.

The opposite of extraverted Lucille, Ruth is an introverted dreamer. "I dreamed that the bridge was a chute into the lake...that the bridge was the frame of a charred house"—prefiguring the fire to come—"and that Sylvie and I were looking for the children who lived there, and though we heard them we could never find them. I dreamed that Sylvie was teaching me to walk under water. To move so slowly needed patience and grace, but she pulled me after her in the slowest waltz, and our clothes flew like the robes of painted angels." Sylvie and Ruth are children too, as in children of God. Learning to walk *under* water, contrasted to Jesus walking *on* water, is (1) baptismal submission to divine will and to (2) the fluid reality of Nature—the Tao; (3) attaining "grace" in a dimension beyond the one in which we breathe; (4) adaptation in the depths of the psyche as a phase of the individuation process toward wholeness. The slowness of movement contrasts with the speed of trains and their clothes fly "like the robes of painted angels" in heaven, such as those painted by their grandfather.

9

The sheriff comes to their house: "This man regularly led the Fourth of July parade... He carried an oversized flag..." He is America, fat and generous: "It was because of his tolerance of transients that they haunted the town as they did." His law enforcement is needed because "The people of Fingerbone and its environs were very much given to murder." Like the world in general. Yet the sheriff also has a feminine side and function: "For decades this same sheriff had been summoned like a midwife to preside over... births in ditches and dark places, out of the bloody loins of circumstance." He has come representing the concerns of the townspeople—the women mainly—that "Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient of me." The term "unredeemed" has the religious implication that settling down and fitting into society like Lucille and Miss Royce is salvation in life—conformity—and that transients, those who do not conform, are damned. On the contrary, Ruth demonstrates that for her conformity would be self-betrayal, like Huck in relation to his society.

Ruth expresses the Calvinism of the older Mark Twain toward human nature when she suggests that "pity and charity may be at root an attempt to propitiate the dark powers that have not touched us yet." Transients "wandered through Fingerbone like ghosts, terrifying as ghosts are because they were not very different from us. And so it was important to the town to believe that I should be rescued, and that rescue was possible." This recalls Huck's flight from Aunt Sally into transience at the end of his story because she wanted to "civilize" him. In this novel literal transients are metaphors of spirits: "The sorrow is that every soul is put out of house. Fingerbone lived always among the dispossessed. In bad times the town was flooded with them," just as it was flooded by the lake. *Housekeeping* allegorizes the truth that "every soul is put out of house," as when the spirit must leave the body. Although the novel is religious, neither Sylvie nor Ruth identify with any theology. They seem closer to Indians than to Miss Royce. Their transcendence of any one religion makes their experience more universal, revealing general truths of human nature in the traditions of Realism and Modernism. They are differentiated from "church women," who in their way are "good women"—pious, charitable, helpful, and well-meaning like women in Twain.

Since she never has any visitors, Sylvie is using the parlor for storage—stacks of newspapers, magazines, and cans. "Sylvie only kept them, I think, because she considered accumulation [materialism] to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift." However, now that nice ladies are visiting, including the wife of a probate judge, Sylvie is responsible for conventional standards of housekeeping, including the personal appearance of Ruth: "For surely they had in recent months remarked in me a tendency to comb my hair

almost never, and to twist it and chew at it continually.” The nice ladies are dismayed. There are thirteen or fourteen cats inhabiting the place and “the cats often brought the birds into the parlor, and left wings and heads lying about, even on the couch.” We may assume that some of these ladies took home economics from Miss Royce, who embodies the “nonsense that really is what most conventional wisdom amounts to,” as Robinson has said elsewhere.

Spontaneous rather than guarded, Sylvie makes the mistake of remarking about Ruth that “She’s like another sister to me. She’s her mother all over again.” She inadvertently suggests what must concern the ladies most, that the town will experience another suicide. At the least, “I would be lost to ordinary society. I would be a ghost... Like a soul released, I would find here only the images and simulacra of the things needed to sustain me.” Ironically, Ruth is already like a soul released.

To please the ladies Sylvie begins cleaning house and puts “artificial flowers” on the kitchen table, in contrast to the pressed flowers of the grandfather and the wild flowers in the woods. Lucille tells her the ladies are planning to remove Ruth from her custody “because we spent the night on the lake.” Ironically, Sylvie’s giving Ruth the greatest spiritual growth experience of her life is thought by the ladies to make her unfit to have custody. They probably will hand her over to prissy Miss Royce. Sylvie works harder at conventional housekeeping, but Ruth prepares herself: “I knew we were doomed.”

10

Ruth foreshadows the ending again with a biblical reference: “The house fell on Job’s children.” Then she prophesies heaven: “There will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.” The faith here is Christian, while the figurative language is Native American, as Ruth continues to transcend cultures.

She invokes the thousand generations descended from Cain—“all of them transients”—and the flood of purgation. She extends the branching metaphor of the lake: “I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather’s, and that the lake’s heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother’s limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight.” Ruth thinks about the last day she and Lucille saw their mother: “I remember her, grave with the peace of the destined, the summoned, and she seems almost an apparition.” She realizes the difference in their relationship had her mother not killed herself “and had come back again for our sakes. She would have remained untransfigured... We would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow if she had come back. But she left us and broke the family and the sorrow was released.”

The futility of Sylvie’s efforts to save what remains of the family evokes a feeling in the reader of the triviality of conventional housekeeping. Yet at the same time, her burning of accumulated trash becomes a spiritual purgation of materialism. Ironically, this leads Sylvie to surrender her identity “in her eagerness to save our household.” She intends to get Ruthie a permanent and to buy her some new clothes “in very good taste. Maybe a suit.” They will even start going to church. “These days she cast about constantly for ways to conform our lives to the expectations of others.” She goes so far as to plan inviting Lucille and Miss Royce to a Thanksgiving dinner.

Out in the orchard at night Ruthie sees the house “with every one of its windows lighted. It looked large, and foreign, and contained, like a moored ship—a fantastic thing to find in a garden.” The ship continues the motif of Sylvie as a mermaid in a ship’s cabin and being “moored” implies that she will be sailing on. Ruth projects herself in telling the story of a young girl strolling at night in an orchard who is actually a spirit. As a “mortal child” she almost forgets spirituality, she suffers the deaths in her family and “the world is lost,” but as a spirit she is free: “She had haunted the orchard out of preference, but she could walk into the lake without a ripple or displacement and sail up the air as invisibly as heat.”

The mortal Ruth revitalizes her spirituality in the orchard, a fruitful place identified with the archetypal Garden and the myth of Eden. Her atonement with Nature is shown in adaptation to the cold: “If you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort.” She achieves transcendence: “I felt giddily free and eager, as you do in dreams, when you suddenly find that you can

fly.” Like a saint fasting in a desert, “I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one.” It is at this point, ironically, that the townspeople determine that Ruth needs to be tethered.

11

Just as they burned accumulated trash, they try to burn down the house. “For we had to leave. I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping.” They even burn family mementos with “purely sentimental value,” purging the material world. “Every last thing would turn to flame and ascend, so cleanly would the soul of the house escape.” They miss hopping a freight train and opt to walk all night across the long hazardous bridge into a life of drifting. As she feels the bridge move under her, Ruth thinks of her mother as a ship that “swayed continuously, like a thing in water.”

Fingerbone points to its own validation: “neighbors were alarmed by increasingly erratic behavior. ‘We should have seen this coming,’ one man remarked. (Mention is made of the fact that my mother had died in the lake, also an apparent suicide.) Dogs traced us to the bridge. Townspeople began searching at dawn for the bodies, but we were never found.” They drift around freely for years, “but we both knew they could always get you for increasingly erratic behavior.” Ruth considers misfortunes inherent in human life, as in reference to “my mother’s abandonment of me. Again, this is the common experience.” In rendering universal truths the novel is founded on the aesthetics of Realism, then rises into Modernism with its poetic style, evocative Expressionism, allegorical symbolism and transcendent vision. At the end we learn that Ruth is dead, the novel has been narrated by a spirit, an affirmation of the afterlife that gives the narrator an authority beyond the reach of dispute—as in several poems by Emily Dickinson.

Housekeeping is a complex blend: (1) the Christian tradition of Anne Bradstreet, Hawthorne, T. S. Eliot, Cather, and Flannery O’Connor; (2) the dark Calvinist and Naturalist literary traditions—natural and social determinism, chance disasters, floods, bitterly cold weather, suicide; and (3) the philosophical tradition of independence and Idealism represented by Emerson, Thoreau and Margaret Fuller. Intellectually this is one of the richest novels since *The Professor’s House* (1925). Like Cather’s novel, *Housekeeping* has most of the recurrent characteristics of the transcendent mode of consciousness in literature: (1) quest into the Wilderness (the individuation process); (2) sense of responsibility to save one’s own soul, psyche or Self; (3) Christ-evoking figure as exemplar and spiritual guide (Sylvie); (4) solitude and self-reliance; (5) confrontation with ultimate Truth, in the forms of wild animals and ghosts; (6) spiritual death and rebirth; (7) atonement with Nature; (8) circular, cyclical and spiral imagery—rowing and drifting; (9) numinous evocation of the divine; (10) mystery, intensity, ecstasy; (11) transcendence of time and space; (12) sense of paradox; (13) holistic perception; (14) harmonious vision of life, unique in its totality, universal in its archetypal components.

Calvinism and barbaric frontier circumstances polarized most Puritans against Nature as the realm of hostile Indians and Satan. The great exception is the mystic Jonathan Edwards in his “Personal Narrative” (1739), which records joyful ecstatic experiences of the natural world that anticipate Emerson. Similar to Edwards, Robinson has said “There’s a puritanical hedonism in my existence.” As in Emerson, in Robinson “Nature is the symbol of spirit.” However, Emerson is a monist and Robinson is a dualist—a Christian. He turned Calvinism upsidedown whereas Calvinism informs Robinson’s vision, conflating with literary Realism and Naturalism, emphasizing both chance and determinism—accidents of birth, genetic character traits, environmental forces of both Nature and Society. Unlike most of the Naturalists, and unlike the Postmodernists who dominate her culture just as materialists did in Emerson’s time, her vision of Nature affirms the primacy of spirit and the reality of an afterlife.

Michael Hollister (2015)