

The exploration of a transient identity

Literature



Themes such as isolation and transience are vividly portrayed through the characters present in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*. The novel follows the lives of sisters Ruth and Lucille Stone, whose father deserts their family too early for them to remember and whose mother commits suicide around six years later. The sisters were neglected in their childhood, the family that surrounded them did not want to care for them and they became isolated from any support system beyond whatever adult could be persuaded to look after them.

When Ruth and Lucille's aunt Sylvie returns to Fingerbone, Idaho to look after the sisters, she presents an unfamiliar lifestyle that ultimately changes their relationship as well as their standards of living. Ruth's transformation from a dependent sister to a transient separates her from important people in her life like her sister Lucille. The isolation that surrounds the sisters and Sylvie leads Ruth to a transient life, yet pushes Lucille away toward a life with the community.

Ruth and Lucille's struggle toward adulthood beautifully illuminates the price of loss and survival, and the dangerous and deep undertow of transience. Ruth and Lucille were initially extremely dependent on each other because throughout their upbringing the family and people that took care of them slowly die off. After leaving Ruth and Lucille at their grandmother's, their mother, Helen, drives her car over a cliff into the lake to her death. Ruth and Lucille's Grandmother raises them, but due to old age and the loss of so many loved ones, she often seems too distracted to really see them.

After their grandmother's death, the grandmother's sister-in-law's attempts to provide care for them, yet they quickly calls Sylvie, Helen's youngest sister, to come and tend to Ruth and Lucille. Sylvie is always walking and looking down and to one side as if listening to a soft-spoken conversation no one else can hear, is mild-mannered and without malice, but she lacks a sense of what is appropriate in society. In the beginning of *Housekeeping*, Robinson describes Ruth and Lucille's relationship as sisters like a bond that could not be broken. Ruth is a close and cautious observer.

For most of her life she and Lucille, existed in a state of watchful anxiety, knowing they were unwanted burdens in the care of a depressed mother, elderly grandmother, and hysterical aunts. Ruth lives mainly in her imagination with her sister as her only friend. Lucille is, from an early age, more assertive than her older sister, but until Sylvie takes over care of them, the two initially are united in an effort to survive. Lucille approaches adolescence at the same time that Sylvie turns their daily life into a downward spiral of disorganization.

While Ruth exhibits a need to join with others, rather than detailing her individual experiences, Ruth refers to everything in agreement with Lucille. There is no individual self, according to Ruth. Ruth then exposes this by saying, " We – in recollection I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness . . . " (Robinson 98). However, despite their changing circumstances, Ruth continues to refuse to define herself as a separate, independent person – apart from Lucille.

Ruth, due to her own actions, becomes invisible throughout the novel by her inability to determine her own thoughts, her dependence upon other characters, and ultimately, through the social death she creates for herself. The first indication of a separation between the tightly bonded sisters is during the week of Sylvie's first arrival. After three days of snowmelt and four days of solid rain the town of Fingerbone was suffering major consequences from a flood.

Although, their house was high up on the ground, the flooding affected the lower level of the house causing Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie to stay marooned in the upstairs. Maureen Ryan writes, " although Lucille wants to venture out to find other people, Sylvie and Ruthie are content to wait in the house... to Sylvie, the flood is merely part of the nature of things, something to be endured as a matter of course" (2). As Ruth explains in the novel after the floods ventured through Fingerbone, " the restoration of the town was an exemplary community effort in which we had no part" (Robinson 74).

Ryan explains how Ruth's narration shows the difference in willingness to help the town between Ruth and Sylvie versus Lucille. The division between Ruth and Lucille is also noted through Sylvie's unorganized way of life that she provides for the girls. Galeshouse states, " The physical world is depicted as a force with which Sylvie and Ruth must contend...Housekeeping's ongoing dialogue between stasis and the urge to drift is best viewed via the physical spaces that Sylvie and Ruth end up inhabiting, altering, and escaping" (128).

Ruth notes, “ She sat on the floor and played Monopoly with us...I spent much of several games in jail, but Sylvie prospered, and she was full of her good fortune, and she made us each a gift of three hotels,” (Robinson 84). Sylvie’s eccentric housekeeping also included creating an outdoor environment in an indoor setting by keeping windows, doors, and cupboards open to air and the natures of the outside and by eating late dinners in the dark, consisting of cold and canned food, and while Ruth and Lucille, “... swung our legs and ate buttered bread” while Sylvie ate with her fingers (87).

This was only the beginning of Lucille’s initial frustration towards Sylvie’s impractical lifestyle. Lucille asserts herself and begins to grow up when she looks outside the chaos of her immediate family situation and longs to escape to a more normal life. For example, “ Lucille saw in everything its potential for invidious change. She wanted worsted mittens, brown oxfords, red rubber boots. Ruffles wilted, sequins fell, satin was impossible to clean. None of the little elegances that Sylvie brought home for us was to be allowed it season” (Robinson 93-4).

Galehouse explains that Lucille places value on sturdiness and reliability by surrounding herself with objects that will endure. Sylvie is indifferent and uninterested in durability (117). Ruth portrays the division between her and Lucille through an explanation of the shoes Sylvie purchased for them. The shoes are cheap, unwearable, and showy. Lucille thinks they are impractical. Since the shoes will not be of use for a long period of time, Lucille regards them as a misuse of money. Ruth, however, loves them for their extravagant nature. She remarks, “ Sylvie always brought us treasures” (Robinson 94).

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This interaction and representation of the sisters highlights Ruth's shift from dependency upon Lucille to dependency upon Sylvie. Lucille's alliance with other people and care for a communicative lifestyle forces Ruth to break away from Lucille and unite with Sylvie. Ruth refers to Lucille's behavior alteration as "[sensing] that Lucille's loyalties were with the other world" (95). Christine Caver argues that, " Lucille was Ruth's one remaining link to a larger community and with her departure Ruth's transformation into a creature of Sylvie's transient lifestyle accelerates rapidly" (126).

Without Lucille, Ruth dismisses herself from her previous attachment to Lucille, while at the same time fulfilling her desire to merge with Sylvie. Caver also argues that since Ruth had previously " conflated her consciousness with Lucille's she evades a separate self once again by remaining in Sylvie's world" (124). This alliance with Sylvie lets Ruth continue to neglect her personal growth and become more invisible with every characteristic. Marcia Aldrich states, " Ruth views her continued attachment positively.

Ruth discovers a likeness of herself and her real mother in Sylvie: "... s 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" (53)" (Aldrich 3). This fear of separation drives Ruth to attach her character onto her aunt's in a stronger, more meaningful manner, continuing to reduce her sense of self and relationship with Lucille. Despite her admission that her aunt is an unstable person, Ruth models her character after Sylvie's and begins copying her aunt's mannerisms.

Like Sylvie, Ruth begins staring absently out windows and securing her unkempt hair with grocery string (Robinson 133). Ruth's neglect to the outside world and to Lucille lead her into a consciousness that follows and does not lead. Following Sylvie to the lake, Ruth notes, "Sylvie was in front of me, and I put my hands in my pockets, and tilted my head, and strode, as she did and it was as if I were her shadow, and moved after her only because she moved and not because I willed this pace, this pocketing of the hands, this tilt of the head.

Following her required neither will nor effort, I did it in my sleep" (145).

Ruth's modeling of Sylvie depicts her commitment to their dual identity. And it is this dual identity that allows Ruth and Sylvie to ultimately become one, entirely disposing of their individual identities. This transient lifestyle secludes them from community and any family they previously had. Ruth's adaptation to an unconventional outlook makes Ruth hardly noticeable to both the reader and also, the townspeople of Fingerbone.

Sylvie and Ruth are now operating on the same level of consciousness.

Galehouse says, "In Housekeeping, physical drifting leads, ultimately, to temporal transience... Through Sylvie, Ruth learns to exist in the world achronologically." (131) Ruth observes, "Sylvie had no awareness of time. For her, hours and minutes were names of trains—we were waiting for the 9:52" (Robinson 165). Galehouse describes that Sylvie and Ruth operate in an infinite present where the past is continuously filtered (134).

This is the main reason in which Lucille conflicts with the lifestyle Sylvie obtains. "Ruth also displays an awareness of the difficulty of getting beyond

habits of thought that will allow "no permanent displacement," which encourage women to remain "indifferent," unaware of difference, and which make the separation of public and private seem as self-evident and unchanging as the surface appearances of objects," (Foster 9). The process of Ruth becoming an attachment of Sylvie's character begins with her inability to speak to anyone else.

The cohesion of Ruth and Sylvie's persons becomes so tight that Ruth is often unable to differentiate who the speaking subject is. Ruth states, "...sometimes one of us spoke, and sometimes one of us answered" (Robinson 163). This isolation of Ruth's voice and character gives Sylvie contentment. Sylvie sets up a household compatible with the transient life she is used to, but the effort is hopeless. She cannot bring herself to conform to Lucille's desire for a normal life, but when Ruth follows her and accepts her, Sylvie doesn't want to give away her custody of Ruth.

The final way Ruth manages to become invisible and destroy her individuality is through the social death she creates for herself. Ruth decides to walk away from society because she fears being separated from Sylvie. However, she separates herself from the rest of the world – increasing her dependence upon Sylvie's character. Sylvie first convinces Ruth of the transient lifestyle saying, "It's not the worst thing, Ruthie, drifting. You'll see. You'll see" (Robinson 210). After Ruth is convinced, they travel across the bridge and away from Fingerbone as well as conventional society, forever.

The townspeople search for them, but to no purpose because ultimately, they assert that Sylvie and Ruth have died trying to leave the town and print in the newspapers, “ Lake Claims Two” (213). This proclamation eliminates their existence. However, Sylvie wears this newspaper clipping pinned to her at all times, like a badge of honor. The girls have achieved the ultimate accomplishment – disappearing from the world completely and becoming invisible, transient. Ruth willingly gives up her individual identity in order to escape the society of Fingerbone.

While she and Sylvie are only dead in a metaphorical sense, they are still “ dead to the ‘ other world’ that Lucille and all the townspeople presumably still inhabit” (Toles 127). This appearance of death to the outside world causes Ruth to assert that she is, in fact, dead (Robinson 217). Death to the outside world, for Ruth, equates death to self. And through this death to her self, Ruth has eliminated the need for her physical body. Ruth’s mind has also become invisible to her body and purged the need for it.

Towards the end of the novel she begins to give up eating and drinking. “ What have I to do with these ceremonies of sustenance, of nurturing? ” she inquires (Robinson 214). Her body has become an accessory to her mind, an accessory she no longer feels a need for. Caver also acknowledges this saying, “ Not only has she lost voice and identity, but her very corporeality is uncertain” (130). Through this diminishing need for a body, Ruth has become consciously invisible not only to the outside world, but also to herself. The real business of Housekeeping evokes the eccentric world of those who live around us but never see us, as others never see them.

Ryan explains that Ruth recognizes and examines throughout her story the subjectivity of experience and the implications of existing in a world in which she refuses to be defined by others (8). " It was a source of both terror and comfort to me then that 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" (Robinson 105). Every event in Ruth's life increased a her distance from surrounding people, ultimately pulling her out of her own consciousness.

The transformation that each character takes on throughout the book illuminates its underlying story of isolation. Tentatively, but with great persistence, Lucille ingratiates herself with girls at school and with her teachers. She tries to bring Ruth along as she gradually expands out of Sylvie's realm, but Ruth cannot fit in and does not want to try. Sylvie cannot bring herself to conform to Lucille's desire for a normal life, but when Ruth follows her and accepts her own form of hands-off nurturing, they each become invisible to the surrounding world.

Ruth speculates that she was always different from other people by saying, " I have observed that, in the way people are strange, they grow stranger" (Robinson 198). By the end of the novel, Ruth and Sylvie have escaped from everyone and everything. Ruth describes her life with Sylvie as one of perfect understanding between them. Even as their drifting lifestyle puts them through hardships, they stay firmly outside of most of human society. Unable to even communicate with Lucille, they inevitably determine to escape by walking the railroad bridge in the middle of the night. Ruth's isolation from everything she grew up with is now complete.