UNHOUSING
IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON’S HOUSEKEEPING

Emilia Schrier

AN HONORS THESIS IN ENGLISH LITERATURE
Stanford University
May 10, 2016

Advisor
Professor Sianne Ngai

Second Reader
Dr. Alice Staveley
Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION: THE WOMAN IN THE HOUSE ........................................ 1

BURNING THE PHYSICAL ....................................................................... 12
  FOUNDATIONS OF THE HOUSE .......................................................... 12
  PROBLEMS OF THE HOUSE ................................................................. 18
  THE HOUSE IN RUINS ........................................................................ 24

TRANSFIGURING THE METAPHYSICAL ............................................ 31
  INTRANSIGENCE .................................................................................. 31
  TRANSFIGURATION .............................................................................. 36
  TRANSIENCE ......................................................................................... 44

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS STATIONARY TRANSIENCE .................... 51

WORKS CITED ..................................................................................... 54
  WORKS CONSULTED ........................................................................ 54
Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of my wonderful advisors. Thank you to Professor Sianne Ngai, who helped me create a framework for my thesis and guided the development of my critical understanding. Thank you to Dr. Alice Staveley, whose enthusiasm and effervescence reassured during the most trying times. Thank you to Professor Mark McGurl, who first introduced me to this magical book two years ago and exposed me to just enough of its wonder that I knew I had to explore it further.

I am also indebted to so many current and former English graduate students who helped me along the way. A thousand thanks to Hannah Smith-Drelich for her unending patience and commitment to my project; no one has ever provided such constructive criticism so kindly, and writing this thesis would not have been possible without her insight and support. Thank you to Becky Richardson, who spent hours listening to me ramble on about my thoughts and helped shape those thoughts into an actual argument. Thank you to Aku Ammah-Tagoe, who prepared me for the long journey of thesis-writing through her guidance during Bing Honors College; and thank you to Jessica Beckman, who encouraged me to apply to the Honors Program in the first place.

Lastly, I would like to thank my friends, who have suffered through months of complaints, breakdowns, and speeches about feminism and the house, and my parents. Thank you for providing me with a model of a loving equal partnership, a safe home, and the freedom to choose my own path (even if it leaves me with no solid prospects of future employment). I would need another 60 pages to say just how much your constant love and support have meant to me.
Introduction: The Woman in the House

[By a woman’s] office, and place, she is protected from all danger and temptation. The man, in his rough work in open world, must encounter all peril and trial: to him, therefore, must be the failure, the offense, the inevitable error…But he guards the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her, unless she herself has sought it, need enter no danger, no temptation, no cause of error or offense. This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter…from all terror, doubt, and division (Ruskin, “Of Queen’s Gardens”)

In 1865, English art critic, writer, and social thinker John Ruskin gave a pair of lectures entitled “Sesame and Lilies,” in which he explained his perception of the male and female role in society, as inspired by the role of kings and queens, respectively. His description of the different offices of men and women typifies the Victorian understanding of separate spheres. The man belongs to the “open world,” which is dangerous and often tainted by sin, greed, and ambition, but he acts as a buffer against these evils for his wife, whose domain is the house. “The man’s work for his own home is…to secure its maintenance, progress, and defense,” but within his house, the wife has control—so long as she does her office, which is to “secure its order, comfort, and loveliness” (Ruskin). If she is skillful in this task, the house becomes a peaceful haven from the treacherous outside world. In fact, Ruskin explains, a truly skillful housewife inherently contains within her a sense of this safe refuge: “Wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head…but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her, better than ceiled with cedar, or painted with vermillion, shedding its quiet light far” (Ruskin). In the Victorian understanding of separate spheres, a proper woman should internalize domesticity, so the concept of femininity is intrinsically tied to the home.
As this ideal of femininity requires true skill, Ruskin does suggest that education be a part of a young woman’s upbringing. The aim of her education must be to prepare her more fully for her domestic duties, and therefore some knowledge is inadvisable: specifically, novels can be dangerous. “The best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act” (Ruskin). In other words, novels might present to women a life more interesting than theirs will ever be, leaving them unhappy with their domestic lot. Ruskin may well have been referring to the gothic novel, a genre whose rise “also coincides with the emergence of an aspiring bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century…and with the increasing domesticization, feminization, and privatization of society” (Mezei and Briganti 838). Featuring extravagant plots, mystery and terror, gothic novels had the potential to incite the very “excitement” that Ruskin found alarming. However, the gothic novel threatened the system of separate through more than just exciting plot. Gothic novels were often written by women—one of the more famous, Ann Radcliff, is said to be the original “mad woman in the attic” (Hoeveler 2). Through writing, these women authors found one of the few available avenues to public life, and many used this public platform to discuss the house.

With the common trope of ‘woman trapped in the house,’ the gothic novel references and borrows from the same concept of domesticity that Ruskin describes in his lecture: “the private space in many traditional Gothic narratives…is tantamount to the limitations of freedom and agency afforded to the female subject as she is confined to the house apparently in order to protect her innocence but is, in truth, fundamentally meant to
subordinate her to male dominance and control” (Ng 4). The woman could not simply
leave this unfortunate situation because “by eighteenth-century definition, women
belonged to the domestic sphere” (Saggini and Soccio 41), and the only control she
exercised in that sphere was over the housekeeping duties that would make her husband’s
house a domestic paradise. As a result, the house was only a paradise for him: “that the
domestic sphere, both in fiction and in reality, was also one where women experienced
imprisonment, frustration, even violence and assault, has long been noted” (Saggini and
Soccio 41). Even as the woman inhabits this seemingly feminized safe space, it is never hers—it remains the husband’s house, and in this way it subordinates her to her husband.
Diane Long Hoeveler describes the covert way in which female Gothic novelists used
this system of separate spheres and the ownership of the house to subvert the patriarchal
elements that trapped both them and their characters inside the house:

The female gothic novelistic tradition became a coded system whereby women authors covertly communicated to other women—their largely female reading audience—their ambivalent rejection of and outward complicity with the dominant sexual ideologies of their culture. Female authors ironically inverted the “separate spheres” ideology by valorizing the private female world of the home while they fictively destroyed the public/juridical masculine world. In other words, the female gothic reified the “separate spheres” ideology in such a way that women were no longer victimized by it but fictively took control of it (Hoeveler 5)

More than simply value the role of the woman in the house, the gothic novel sought to subtly give her control of the house. Within the plot, this often meant somehow besting the forces of the patriarchy, perhaps personified by some evil uncle trying to gain the naïve protagonist’s inheritance (Hoeveler 6). In successfully gaining the inheritance and preserving the house, the protagonist actually subverts the concept of separate spheres: she has shown that the corruption of the outside world does affect the house, despite man
as buffer, and she demonstrates that the best way to truly protect the home is to place it fully in her ownership, not just her care. In this way, the female gothic novels “adapted [a chaste, dutiful, and obedient] model of femininity while making such a heroine covertly powerful” (Hoeveler xvi). This covert power results in the “fictional feminization of the masculine world, the domestication of all those masculine institutions that exist…[the female gothic writer] attempted nothing less than a redefinition of sexuality and power in a gendered, patriarchal society; she fictively reshaped the family, deconstructing [patrimonialism and patrilineality], she created her own peculiar form of feminism” (Hoeveler xiii, 19). By subjecting the masculine outer world to the domestic female world, the female gothic novelist subtly shifts the balance of power in the system of separate spheres. Rather than being allowed to operate within the man’s house, the woman in a gothic novel might herself own the house, and harness the powers of the masculine world to protect that claim of ownership. So the female gothic novelists used novels, one of the few ways in which they as women could enter the public sphere, to quietly rebel against the same system that limited them by presenting an image of a new system in which power has shifted slightly from the man to the woman.

Notably, however, the gothic novel does not attempt to sever ties between the woman and the house; the system of separate spheres is undermined by empowering the domestic over the worldly, not by breaking the boundaries and inviting the woman into the public sphere. First wave feminists in the early 20th century, encountering the same problem of separate spheres, responded in a similar fashion: Virginia Woolf writes in her essay *A Room of One's Own* about the need for a private space within the house, noting how many women novelists have shared this struggle:
I thought, looking at the four famous names, what had George Eliot in common with Emily Brontë? Did not Charlotte Brontë entirely fail to understand Jane Austen?...four more incongruous characters could not have met together in a room...yet by some strange force they were all compelled, when they wrote, to write novels. Had it something to do with being born of the middle class...that the middle-class family in the early nineteenth century was possessed only of a single sitting-room between them? If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. (Woolf 65-66).

Woolf describes a fascinating parallel: these novelists, without having a private room in which to write, must have been forced to write in the sitting-room, and the sitting-room is a place of great importance in the resulting novels. Austen famously appreciated the creaking wood floor, as it would warn her when she was about to be interrupted by visitors (Woolf 66). So even as women writers managed to extend influence and presence beyond the private sphere, they were still constrained by and within the house and their novels became a way to protest the social structures that contained them. This protest worked in a variety of ways: “in writing from a domestic space of house, house-hold, and family, women writers created a position in the female of cultural production from which to value ordinary women’s lives, the quotidian, the minute;” novels about the house could “bestow literary value on domesticity and domestic space,” thereby empowering the woman in that space (Mezei and Briganti 843). Woolf herself participates in this elevation of the quotidian through short stories like “Moments of Being.” So through the early 1900s, feminist attempts at dismantling the system of separate spheres still focused on transforming the domestic sphere to the benefit of the women confined to it.

By the 1950s, however, it was not enough to simply elevate the prison of the woman. In her 1987 book “Just a Housewife:” The Rise and Fall od Domesticity in America, Glenna Matthews describes how the “[postwar] suburban housewife was doubly isolated: physically, by the nature of housing patterns, and spiritually, because she
had become merely the general factotum for her family. She was a cog in the economic machine, necessary for the maintenance of prosperity but overlooked in discussions of the gross national product” (Matthews xiv). The housewife was still necessary in the maintenance of the house, but her role was neither acknowledged nor appreciated. In answer to the growing discontent engendered by this sad situation, housewives were told that their unhappiness was self-inflicted, stemming from their inability to accept their domestic roles:

If housewives were being told to abjure any interest in changing the world, they were also being told much more explicitly than ever before to render personal service to their husbands and to be dependent, especially if they happened to have jobs outside the home. One expert, after advising working wives to be sure that their husbands had received an adequate quota of small personal services, addressed husbands as follows: “Make your wife as dependent on you as you can in all matters relating to the management of your home and life. There must be a greater percentage of dependence on the part of a wife than a husband; if this isn’t financial, it will have to be in other matters (Matthews 199)

The emphasis here is not on creating a safe and peaceful haven, but quite explicitly on the subjugation of the wife. Even, or especially, in cases where the wife has managed to enter the public world to work, the husband is charged with finding some other way to make her dependent on him. A similar expert proclaimed, “only if women were to reestablish their essential dependence on men and stay home could they and their families achieve contentment” (Matthews 209). Convincing an educated and intelligent woman that she can only find happiness through ‘essential dependence on men’ is not so easy, but society in the 1950s had the full force of consumerism and advertising behind it, resulting in the phenomenon that Betty Friedan labeled “the feminine mystique.” A model of femininity began to appear in newspapers, television, radio, and every other avenue available: “The suburban housewife—she is the dream image of young American women and the envy, it
was said, of women all over the world…She had found true feminine fulfillment. As a housewife and mother, she was respected as a full and equal partner to man in his world” (Friedan 18). Presented everywhere and often to young women from the time they were little girls, the new mystique made “the housewife-mothers, who never had a chance to be anything else, the model for all women” (Freidan 43). So girls were brought up to prepare for marriage and motherhood and told repeatedly that such a life would lead them to true fulfillment, even as many of them suffered silently from the limitations of domestic life. Friedan conducted a survey of her former Smith College classmates, and the responses, which inspired her to write *The Feminine Mystique*, are quoted throughout. Many of these responses directly contradict the idea of fulfillment through housework: “I never had any career ambitions,” says one, “All I wanted was to get married and have four kids…But I’m desperate. I begin to feel I have no personality” (21). Response after response describes how women would stretch out housework that might take a few hours into the task of a full day, in hopes that the challenge might make it meaningful, only to end every day with a profound sense of a loss or lack of identity.

Though Friedan’s work is directed specifically at the middle-class housewife, the consequence of these strict separate spheres affected women of all classes. “For poor women it was not the emptiness of life which was the problem but an intricate domestic economy in which unpaid domestic labour was combined with low-paid activities” (Rowbotham 28). So women, whether out of boredom and lack of identity or out of sheer economic necessity, felt keenly the need to break out of the house and enter into the public sphere. This requires not an elevation of the sphere of domesticity, but a break from it—second wave feminist like Friedan and Matthews advocated for a separation
between femininity and the domestic space of the house. In this sense “modern feminism might be said to have been born out of the repudiation of women’s traditional roles and not out of the desire both to glorify and expand those roles as in the nineteenth century” (Matthews 225). Where the gothic novelists and first wave feminists glorified the domestic life to empower the woman, second wave feminists attempted to break the bond by rejecting the domestic life presented as the traditional feminine role.

For both Friedan and Woolf, the way to solve the housewife’s plight is creativity. Without a passion and creative endeavor, Friedan says, the woman will lose her sense of self—but she cannot do this within the typical structure of the house because “the picture of the happy housewife doing creative work at home…is one of the semi-delusions of the feminine mystique…when a man works at home, his wife keeps the children strictly out of the way, or else. It is not so easy for a woman” (Friedan 350). Woolf agrees: bemoaning the difficulties that writers suffer from distraction, she explains “for women…these difficulties were infinitely more formidable. In the first place, to have a room of her own, let alone a quiet room or a sound-proof room, was out of the question” (Woolf 52). So the female gothic novelists and the first and second wave feminists encounter the same problem: in attempting to free herself from the domestic space, a woman must use that space—but she must somehow own it or exert influence over it, otherwise she will be unable to write, to create. Matthews ends her book with the question posed by this problem: “Can [the] home…survive and prosper in the late twentieth century…without entailing the exploitation of women?” (Matthews 225).

Author Marilynne Robinson attempts to answer this question in her novel, *Housekeeping*. Published in 1980 and set in 1960, the novel spans much of the time
frame of Friedan and Matthews’ writing, but reaches back to the 19th century for inspiration and adopts many tropes from the gothic novel. *Housekeeping* is narrated by Ruth, who tells the story of her childhood in the fictional town of Fingerbone, Idaho. Ruth and her sister Lucille are raised by her grandmother after her mother, Helen, commits suicide by driving off a cliff into the lake. After their grandmother’s death, the girls are cared for by their aunt Sylvie, whose odd interpretation of domesticity sparks a series of events that forever change both Ruth and the family house. Like the gothic novel, *Housekeeping* features women trapped in the house occupied by ghosts and, despite the absence of living male characters, they are still subject to patriarchal influence. In *Housekeeping* family, the very thing that makes the house “a place of refuge, comfort and rest” also becomes “the unfamiliar…that directly disperses [the familiar]” (Ng 2). As Andrew Hock Soon Ng explains in *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives*, the fact that the house is capable of creating this dichotomy, and of being both the site of patriarchal authority as well as female empowerment, marks the house’s function “as more than just a stage for narrative unfolding…the subject of many Gothic works is not just their principle character, but also frequently the house itself” (Ng 4-5). In *Housekeeping*, then, Robinson creates a new American gothic; like her 19th century predecessors, Robinson (who was herself a housewife before she became a novelist) writes about the house in order to destabilize the traditional understanding of domesticity that continued to constrain women through the latter half of the 20th century. Like the traditional gothic, *Housekeeping* features a “domestic space that has the power to unnerve, fragment, and even destroy its inhabitant unless something is done to arrest it and restore order and normalcy back to the house”
The house in the novel, as the domestic space, is built to be a sanctuary from the outside world but is instead a place of inescapable trauma. This trauma threatens the protagonist’s well-being and, eventually, her very existence; to survive it, Ruth, in the role of the artist figure, deconstructs the home and remakes the very concept of domesticity.

In writing the house, Robinson joins a legacy of female novelists like Radcliff, Austen, and Woolf who work to undo the constraint of separate spheres. Robinson’s treatment of the domestic space differs from that of her predecessors because, as a woman writing during the height of second-wave feminism, she can envision a solution that was not feasible for the writers who came before her: Robinson’s characters can actually leave the house; by the late 20th century, women could work outside the house. So she can conceive of a character like Sylvie, who spends the majority of her time in the public sphere. The problem lay in the residual ties from the rigid private and public sphere divide—though women could now work, they were still seen as somehow belonging to the house. As this tie had very real consequences for women, such as lower pay, second wave feminists sought to free the woman from this chain.

However, this possible solution of the woman outside the house uncovers new difficulties that Radcliff, Austen, and Woolf did not encounter; second-wave feminists and novelists had to negotiate the problem of expulsion. In leaving the house, does the woman bar herself from returning? This, of course, would not be ideal, as the desired end is not a destruction of the separate spheres but simply the system that requires women to exist solely in one: “The private sphere [does not have] more intrinsic worth than the public sphere. Rather, there are certain important values that are generated in each realm.
A disproportionate emphasis on one realm at the expense of the other impoverishes the whole of life” (Matthews 226). How might the 20th century woman exit the house without losing her access to it?

Similarly, Robinson’s novel asks the question, ‘does a rejection of domesticity require a similar abandonment of femininity? If we understand the traditional concept of domesticity to revolve around a peaceful, serene household created by the woman for her husband in the name of safety, what might domesticity look like if the woman is not bound by societal expectation to create it? Can a sense of domesticity created by the woman, for herself, be imagined?

*Housekeeping* seeks to answer these questions by destabilizing the traditional concepts of domesticity and the home. In my first chapter, I will describe how the house engenders and maintains trauma rather than safety, despite the best intentions. Despite the lack of men, the house is still a place of suffering because the women still belong to the house and cannot leave even when there is no safety left and the very boundaries that define the house erode. My second chapter will discuss Ruth’s journey out of this cycle of pain through her transformation to artist figure. As a creative force, Ruth can undo the constraints of the house and construct a new form of domesticity.
Foundations of the House

The house at the heart of Robinson’s novel is built with a set of guiding principles in mind. Like the house in the gothic novel, it is meant to be a safe haven for the family. When Ruth’s grandfather, Mr. Foster, decides to settle down in Fingerbone, he does so “trailing us after him unborn”—his family, even before fully existing, guides the creation of the house (Robinson 149). This focus on family does not fade over time, as Ruth begins the novel by introducing herself and her relatives through their relation to the house:

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvie Fisher. Through all these generations of elders we lived in one house, my grandmother’s house, built for her by her husband. (3)

“All these generations of elders” lived in the house; the structure is so tied to the Foster family history and identity that Ruth can neither begin her story nor introduce herself without first placing herself and her family lineage in the house. So closely tied are the Foster family and the house that Ruth offers the lineage of the house immediately after describing her own. Ruth’s introduction also shows that the house is meant, more specifically, as a safe haven for the women of the family. Thus the house, though built by her grandfather, is her “grandmother’s house.” Through all the generations listed, the house does not change hands—because Mr. Foster builds it for her, it remains Mrs. Foster’s after his death, and even after hers. Mrs. Foster does not take this issue of ownership lightly, as she understands the perilous position of women in the mid-20th century: “Sell the orchards,’ she would say… “but keep the house. So long as you look
after your health and own the roof above your head, you’re as safe as anyone can be” (27). Both grandfather and grandmother are well aware of the natural dangers outside the house, but Mrs. Foster here is referencing a different kind of safety. She tells Ruth ‘as safe as anyone can be,’ but the unspoken message is ‘as safe as any woman can be.’ As the women of her generation are relegated to the home, Sylvia understands the need to preserve and maintain that safe space for women; having uprooted herself to follow her own husband to Fingerbone, Ruth’s grandmother knows firsthand the benefits of a solid foundation. Her house ties her to Fingerbone, gives her roots and allows them to grow stronger, which become invaluable when tragedy strikes. Mr. Foster dies in a train accident that rocks the community and ends with the train at the bottom of the lake, after which no bodies can be recovered. Mrs. Foster has a the reason and the luxury to stay, but the other two new widows of the town are not so fortunate—both leave their old lives behind, “one to live with a married daughter in North Dakota and the other to find any friends or kin in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, which she had left as a bride” (8). Without owning their own home, they are forced to leave their old lives and find shelter in the home of someone else—some other male presence. Mrs. Foster, however, owns her home and is thus able to maintain the integrity of her family after the loss of the father and head of the household.

In order to maintain the safety and independence afforded by the house, Mr. Foster builds the structure with some specific boundaries in mind. Firstly, the house must separate itself from the landscape surrounding it. Ruth’s grandfather “had grown up in the Middle West, in a house dug out of the ground…from without, the house was a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave” (3). Though in execution, this first
ancestral home is more reminiscent of a grave than anything else, the original intention is clear: the structure was meant to be a “human stronghold” against the elements. Ruth’s description paints this first house as a humble shelter daring to defy a barren, harsh landscape, an image that follows Mr. Foster as he makes his way from the desert to the mountains and finally to Fingerbone. Consequently, the house he builds for his own family is a prouder, improved stronghold against nature: it stands on a hill, far from the reaches of the lake’s yearly floods. Fingerbone’s lake is not the only threat, however; in fact, all of the natural features and elements of the area seem to wage war against the house. During the winters “limbs from the apple orchard flew against the side of the house” and “the wind [would] badger the house, throwing frozen rain against the windows” (36, 49). From the onset, then, the house must withstand, push against, and exclude the forces of nature.

This protection from the natural world becomes all the more important as Ruth starts to equate the lake with death. Mr. Foster and the other unfortunate train passengers lie at the bottom of its depths, as does Ruth’s mother Helen, and after Mrs. Foster’s death, Ruth places her in the lake as well. After reading her grandmother’s obituary, Ruth dreams that she walked on the surface of the lake, “but in the dream the surface I walked on proved to be knit up of hands and arms and upturned faces...The dream and the obituary together created in my mind the conviction that my grandmother had entered into some other element” (41). The hands and arms that she imagines are the bodies of all the lake’s dead. By adding her grandmother, who did not drown in the lake, to this “element,” Ruth imagines the lake to be a sort of purgatory: its inhabitants do not belong in houses with the living, but they remain present on earth.
The house is also built to be equally isolated from the town. As Ruth explains, “Our whole family was standoffish...That we were self-sufficient, our house reminded us always. If its fenestration was random, if its corners were out of square, my grandfather had built it himself, knowing nothing whatsoever of carpentry” (74). The Fosters prize their self-sufficiency over community, so the house is purposefully removed from the social center of the town: after a particularly bad flooding that threatens to wipe Fingerbone off the map, Ruth notes “[my grandfather] had the good judgment to set [the house] on a hill, so while others were pushing drowned mattresses out second-story windows, we simply spooled up our living-room rug and propped it on the porch step” (74). The family, already physically distant from the town, grows emotionally distant as well when Fingerbone’s natural disaster leaves them essentially untouched: they cannot share in the suffering, and their relative wealth sets them apart from the newly destitute townspeople. This isolation results in a much-desired sense of privacy. Mrs. Foster, for whom the house is built, so enjoys the peaceful solitary existence of a housewife in a lonely house that her husband’s death has little effect on the life in the house, perhaps because it was “not altogether unanticipated. How many times had she waked in the morning to find him gone?” (10). If anything, his death heightens the most peaceful effects of the original founding principles. The house becomes intensely private because Mr. Foster’s death removes the family entirely from the public sphere:

With him gone they were cut free from the troublesome possibilities of success, recognition, advancement. They had no reason to look forward, nothing to regret. Their lives spun off the tilting world like thread off a spindle, breakfast time, suppertime, lilac time, apple time…if immortality was to be this life held in poise and arrest…it is no wonder that five serene, eventless years lulled my grandmother into forgetting what she should never have forgotten. (13)
With the loss of the only male member of the household, the remaining members of the Foster family are released from the worries of the public world. Free from the demands of success and advancement, Mrs. Foster and her three daughters seem to fall away from the course of history. They belong not to the world now, but only to themselves, and out of this intense privacy Mrs. Foster creates her own little paradise. The new living circumstance is described as a kind of heaven, with “immortality” and “serene, eventless years,” free from “troublesome possibilities” and regrets.

The Foster women also fall away from time. Life continues in the house, but time has somehow stalled; nothing develops or changes, but neither does it end. Their life becomes an endless dependable routine: “breakfast time, suppertime, lilac time, apple time.” Having lost ties to, and therefore the influence from, the masculine outside world, the house is feminized. The girls abandon the standard measurements of time in favor of chronological markers that reflect domestic yet poetic activities. For Mrs. Foster, this simplicity marks a “resurrection of the ordinary,” a return to the stability and comfort she had felt before her husband’s death (18). Built originally to provide safety, the house also provides stability, and continues to do so even after Mrs. Foster’s death. When Lily and Nona, the two maiden aunts who come to care for Ruth and Lucille, consider asking Sylvie to care for the girls instead, they discuss her unconventionality and then consider how to fix them:

“Perhaps some attention from her family…”
“A family can help.”
“Responsibility might help.”
The spoons went round and round in cups until someone finally said, “…a sense of home” (39).
Lily and Nona have heard some rumors about Sylvie’s eccentricities; she is difficult to find as she is constantly moving and her address is perpetually changing. Sylvie is, then, unstable—a condition which might be helped by attention, family, and responsibility. Ultimately, though, the only antidote to her variability is a matched stability created by a sense of home; the house itself can act as an influencing factor and a method for stability. Either Lily or Nona pronounces this answer, but the text reads ‘someone,’ as though a collective voice has spoken some eternal truth.

Just as Mrs. Foster enjoys the simplicity of the isolated house, she revels in the routine created after Mr. Foster’s death. It is she who craves the “resurrection of the ordinary,” the “dear ordinary” (15). Out of this pervasive routine comes an equally pervasive silence:

Her girls were quiet...because the customs and habits of their lives had almost relieved them of the need for speech. Sylvie took her coffee with two lumps of sugar, Helen liked her toasts dark, and Molly took hers without butter. These things were known...perfect quiet had settled into their house after the death of their father. (15)

Routine, then, erases speech and the house becomes silent and still. The silence, too, persists after Mrs. Foster’s death. Lily and Nona never wished to care for children, but they accept the care of Lucille and Ruth because

“I’m sure they’d be quiet.”
“They’re very quiet.”
“Girls always are.” (37)

Girls are always quiet, even in the house—because the house itself is quiet. This silence contributes to the serenity that Mrs. Foster craves. So the house, built by Mr. Foster as a safe haven for his family and specifically for his wife, relies on the boundaries between itself and the surrounding environment, both natural and social, to protect that safety. It
appears that his efforts have not gone to waste, as after his death Mrs. Foster and her daughters are left alone to create their own private feminine space. Consequently, the house becomes serene, timeless, routine, and quiet. So the physical structure of the house is built to ensure the safety of its inhabitants, particularly its women. Through isolation and enforced boundaries, the house achieves this desired peaceful existence, but because *Housekeeping* follows in the gothic tradition, we might foresee that this safety is but an illusion that will soon fall.

**Problems of the House**

Despite promising beginnings and Mr. Foster’s best efforts, the house is neither as safe nor as isolated as it seems. The boundaries erected to protect the house fail: built to wage war against nature, the house loses this battle early on. Ruth’s grandmother “always boasted that the floods never reached our house,” but during the first spring with Sylvie, the water “poured over the thresholds and covered the floor…obliging us to wear boots…We lived on the second floor for a number of days” (61). This flood violates the safety of the house, for no longer does a roof guarantee health. The water literally overruns the boundary of the walls, and seems to take ownership of the house—the girls are forced to completely change their habits and abandon the first floor. It even destabilizes the entire structure, as Sylvie and Ruth dance through the hall and “the house flowed around us” (64). Nature, having successfully moved in, leaves its traces on the first floor of the house for the rest of the novel. This destabilization of walls hints at the corresponding threat to independence: earlier, Ruth considers her grandmother’s house, orchard, and belongings, recognizing that “all of these things would eventually become liquid, capable of assuming new forms” (27). The explicit meaning here is that the belongings will become monetary capital, but the phrase is also a hidden prophecy of the
terrible flood that invades the house—and if the flood can endanger the safety of the house, perhaps it can endanger the ownership and independence of the house as well.

The lake’s presence also disturbs the house’s stillness and silence: “We could hear the lake groan….the afternoon was loud with the giant miseries of the lake…the clashes and groans from the lake continued unabated, dreadful at night, and the sound of the night wind in the mountains was like one long drawn breath. Downstairs the flood bumped and fumbled like a blind man in a strange house” (65). The water, fumbling around, acts as a stranger in the previously private space, with noise enough to drown out “all else,” but especially the previous silence. Most importantly, the ‘miseries’ of the lake call to mind that the lake contains the dead. Ruth admits, “It is true that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone” (9), but with this magnificent flooding during the first year of Sylvie’s housekeeping, the lake enters the house, bringing with it the constant, inescapable, and far more personal reminder of the lake’s dead. So the invasion of the lake allows the presence of the dead to enter the space of the living, and Ruth begins to feel their otherworldly presences: one evening, Sylvie brushes her hair and Ruth sees the image of her own mother performing the same ritual in the mirror:

Was this coincidence just another proof of the conspiracy of the senses with the world? … Sylvie’s head falls to the side and we see the blades of my mother’s shoulders … Helen is the woman in the mirror, the woman in the dream, the woman remembered, the woman in the water, and her nerves guide the blind fingers that touch into place all the falling strands of Sylvie’s hair (131-132).

Ruth sees and feels the presence of her mother, “the woman in the water,” so strongly that she begins to doubt her own senses. The lake’s intrusion reminds her of her great loss, and the pain of this memory begins to haunt Ruth—she can no longer trust herself, and she sees her dead mother as a being with influence, guiding Sylvie’s hand as she
brushes her hair. These ghostly presences and reminders, having once gained entry to the house, remain throughout the novel.

Secondly, the isolation that Mrs. Foster enjoys so much is only a temporary isolation, if not an illusion altogether. Despite the geographic and emotional distance between the Fosters and the town of Fingerbone, the town seems to take a strong interest in the Foster family and homestead. While privacy might make the family strong, it makes the town weak, as Ruth explains: Fingerbone is “shallow-rooted…it flooded yearly, and had burned down…anyone might feel that Fingerbone was a meager and difficult place. So diaspora threatened always” (177). Entirely dwarfed by its natural surroundings, “the town itself seemed a negligible thing…it would have been possible not to notice the town at all” (34). This dwarfing of the town has significant consequences in the minds of its inhabitants, who are keenly aware of Fingerbone’s vulnerability. To combat the threat of diaspora and negligence, the town must unify and protect its houses. This requires an intense publication of private matters, seen most easily in the treatment of death. Mrs. Foster, for example, always knew that at some point “her simple private destiny would intersect with the great public processes of law and finance—that is, [at] the time of her death” (27). This “great public process” revealed when her obituary is “bunched, no doubt, to cushion Christmas ornaments for storage, and spindled to start kitchen fires, though it was quite impressive and much admired. For my grandmother’s passing had brought to mind the disaster that had widowed her” (40). The private life of the family, then, becomes so public that it leaves the house for the public sphere, and then enters the private spaces of others—the greatest violation of privacy possible. Family history, like Mr. Foster’s disaster, is also paraded in public,
because his death relates to the life and health of his family, and therefore the town has an interest in it.

Far more important to the town than the public process of death, however, is the private process of housekeeping. Herein lies the incredibly important role of women in Fingerbone: as Fingerbone requires houses to exist and the private home is woman’s domain, her job of maintaining it takes on supreme importance. Housekeeping, then, is an act meant to preserve not just the physical properties of the house, but the social as well. Implicit in this role is the task of childrearing, and instructing children so that they, too, may grow to contribute to the life of Fingerbone. Consequently, with housekeeping come all the connotations of motherhood. Mrs. Foster is described as knowing “a thousand songs. Her bread was tender and her jelly was tart, and on rainy days she made cookies and applesauce. In the summer she kept roses in a vase on the piano... Her children slept on starched sheets under layers of quilts and in the morning her curtains filled with light the way sails filled with wind” (11-12). Her skills as a housekeeper (baking, flower arranging, cleaning sheets) are inextricable from her skills as a mother (singing songs, baking cookies, getting the children to sleep). This double role is demanded even of women who are not actually mothers. Lily and Nona, the maiden great-aunts, arrive to “take up housekeeping in Fingerbone, just as my grandmother had wished …they were, though maiden ladies, of a buxomly maternal appearance that contrasted oddly with their brusque, unpracticed pats and kisses” (29). Ruth expressly points out the “motherliness” about them, because they come to keep house. Fingerbone therefore is highly invested in the internal goings-on of the Foster home, and infinitely more so after the matriarch, Mrs. Foster, dies and leaves a vacuum to be filled by a good housekeeper.
Because of the duties of housekeeping and motherhood, the women in the Foster family are discussed frequently in the outside world. This interest is not reciprocated, however; in fact, the Foster women are so disinterested with the public world that the men in the novel, who are the only link to the public sphere, seem entirely negligible. Ruth describes her grandfather, for example, as “a watchman, or perhaps a signalman” (5). She knows so little about him that she cannot even recall his position in the very job that ended in his death. This indifference to her grandfather’s history is directly contrasted to the immediate and detailed recitation of female family members at the very start of the novel, “I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother…” (3). Had he known, Mr. Foster may not have minded her indifference, as he seems to have viewed himself as worthy of little note. His only photograph features “a man identified as my grandfather…his expression seemed to be one of astonishment” (40). His inconsequence sets the tone for that of the other husbands in the novel, including “a certain Reginald Stone, [Ruth’s] putative father,” of whom she has “no memory…at all;” and Sylvie’s absent husband, “someone named Fisher” (14). In both cases, Ruth’s disinterest and lack of knowledge is echoed by the men themselves. In the only photos taken at Reginald’s wedding, he is looking off to the side and “clearly he does not consider himself the subject of either photograph” (14). ‘Someone’ Fisher is allowed even less acknowledgement, as “no snapshots were made” of his marriage (14).

This resounding lack of male presence causes the Foster women to ‘fall off the map.’ Without a male presence to tie them to the public world, the only place left to them is the private house. This does not immediately present a problem, because Mrs. Foster owns the house and therefore has no pressing need to re-enter the public sphere.
Consequently, her ownership of the house, independence, and comforting routine “lull [her] into forgetting what she should never have forgotten:” that there is loss within the house, too. Just as the house has become the only place for the women, with the death of Mr. Foster it becomes a place only for women (13). Comfortable though they are in their own isolated world, the Foster daughters will leave if they choose to marry, as both Sylvie and Helen do. In fact, daughters will leave even without marrying, as Molly does when she becomes a missionary: because the house is so private and has no connection to the public sphere, the daughters must leave it entirely when they choose to enter the public sphere. Herein lies the inherent problem of the home, as Ruth eventually realizes: “The sorrow is that every soul is put out of house” (170). No matter how stable, safe, and private the house may seem, it is impermanent; though the walls and histories remain, the inhabitants do not. Whether they live or die, none can stay forever. The very routine that Mrs. Foster hides behind leads her blindsided when all three daughters leave within the year; it was “among the things she thought of as familiar that this disaster had taken shape” (25). The house, meant to be a safe place for family, must also always be the place of deep painful loss. So the only privacy that is granted to the house ends up harming it.

This loss, we discover, is specifically a gendered loss: the pain inherent in the house is the pain of motherhood. All mothers must lose their children: children die, are removed by the state, or simply grow up and leave the house. Even Lily and Nona, the maiden aunts who come stay after Mrs. Foster’s death, suffer from this pain. Fretting over the girls one cold winter evening, the aunts could not be calmed because “granting that…subsequent winters might spare us, there were still the perils of adolescence, or marriage, of birth” (36). After this conversation, the aunts decide they are unequal to this
sorrow, ask Sylvie to come instead, and quit the house entirely. Routine, then, cannot protect against loss. The perceived stability is ultimately a state of permanent impermanence: children are forever leaving, and no amount of isolation or stability can prevent it. So Housekeeping presents a string of women who fail at their duties: Lily and Nona find the duties of motherhood, or rather the pain of loss that comes with motherhood, too difficult to handle so they quickly give it up. Helen’s reaction, far more extreme, is a complete abandonment of both the role of motherhood and the world that demands it. Mrs. Foster, the only woman who successfully and skillfully fulfills the roles of housewife and mother, suffers equally—she does not find the enjoyment promised to her by the theory behind the gender roles. In following and failing convention, none of Ruth’s elders have found the peace that ought to exist in the house; perhaps Sylvie, who defies convention, is better prepared for the task of motherhood.

The House in Ruins

From the onset, Housekeeping is a story of boundaries, the separations between what belongs inside and what should stay outside the house. More specifically, it is a story of broken boundaries, and the trauma that occurs when these boundaries erode. When she comes to stay, Sylvie walks in to an already broken home with suspiciously porous walls, almost as though the boundaries have been inverted. The external is brought in, and the internal is expelled. In response to the loss she encounters in the house, Sylvie adopts an entirely unique style of housekeeping. Though she has been called to the house to follow Mrs. Foster’s good example and raise the girls properly, Sylvie is perhaps not the best woman for the job. Before accepting the care of her nieces, Sylvie lived on trains, relishing not a particular destination but simply the freedom of the journey to go “somewhere. Wherever. Where do you want to go?” (50). This penchant
for travel signifies in Sylvie a lack of appreciation, if not total dislike, for walls and
boundaries, so Sylvie’s housekeeping utterly defies the example of stagnant order that
Mrs. Foster sets. Ruth recalls the beginning of this strange brand of housekeeping:

I remember Sylvie walking through the house with a scarf tied around her
hair… Yet this was the time that leaves began to gather in the corners… There
were scraps of paper among them, crisp and strained from their mingling in the
cold brown liquors of decay and regeneration… Thus finely 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 littles and perhaps
unawares to ready it for wasps and bats and barn swallows. Sylvie talked a great
deal about housekeeping… Sylvie believed in stern solvents, and most of all in
air. It was for the sake of air that she opened doors and windows. (85)

Sylvie understands that in order to combat the trauma and grief that plague Ruth and
Lucille, the boundaries of the house, already weak and disintegrated, must be broken. She
flings open the doors to nature and removes the distinction between internal and external,
allowing the spaces for the living and the dead to comingle freely, thus avoiding the
forced and unavoidable ruin of the house. She takes control of the process and makes it
deliberate, which makes all the difference: in welcoming the outside, the lake, and the
dead, she removes the pain of their eventual intrusion. The mechanisms of this solution
can be seen in Sylvie’s adoption of darkness: she finds that she “dislikes the
disequilibrium of counterpoising a roomful of light against a worldful of darkness” and
so she turns the lights off during summer nights—the house is plunged in darkness and
the girls “stepped through the door from sheer night to sheer night” (99). By removing
the boundaries herself, Sylvie avoids the jarring discomfort of being forced to watch the
boundaries fall.

When confronted with the porousness around her, Ruth initially clings all the
more steadfastly to the boundaries around her in an attempt to reinforce them. This is
evident from her very introduction, where she describes her environment by separating it into different sections:

At the foundation is the old lake, which is smothered and nameless and altogether black. Then there is Fingerbone, the lake of charts and photographs, which is permeated by sunlight and sustains green life and innumerable fish…And above that, the lake that rises in the spring and turns the grass dark and coarse as reeds. And above that the water suspended in sunlight. (9)

She creates a lineage for the water, echoing the lineage of her own family, by labeling the different layers of water to separate them into different spaces. The exercise also allows her to distinguish between the black, old lake that claims the dead, and the sunny lake in which she plays. However, distinguishing one lake from another does not stop either from invading the house. The first breach of boundary opened the floodgates, and more and more boundaries are overrun. Forced to confront the lack of order in her life, Ruth eventually understands the peace that comes with Sylvie’s equilibrium. After walking too far along the shore of the lake one day, Ruth and Lucille are forced to spend the night in a makeshift camp along the shore. They build a “low and slovenly structure, to all appearances random and accidental,” (114) but it provides enough of an illusion of perimeters that the girls “fell uneasy asleep” (115). Ruth awakens in pitch darkness to a collapsed roof; she “scrambled out through the roof and over the wall into darkness no less absolute” (115). Like the darkness that Sylvie invites into the kitchen, the internal and external darkness of the makeshift hut is the same, thereby negating the necessity of walls and boundaries. In this moment, Ruth finds peace with the destruction of boundaries: “I simply let the darkness become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones” (116).
Like Ruth, Lucille reacts to the initial destruction of boundaries by holding tightly to order, thereby establishing herself as the contradiction to Sylvie’s disorder. In this she aligns herself with the beliefs held by the townspeople, who are increasingly troubled by the new forms of housekeeping. A visiting wife from the town tells Sylvie very serious, “a young girl needs an orderly life” (185). Unlike Ruth, however, Lucille does not have a moment of change—the same evening that Ruth allows darkness to penetrate her, Lucille pushes away the equilibrium, “never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun” (115). Consequently, she never feels quite comfortable in Sylvie’s house, ultimately “regarding other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore” (92). This becomes a moment of divergence between Lucille and Ruth. Whereas Ruth is quite content with Sylvie and her destructive influence, Lucille clings to the traditional structures around her and begins to turn elsewhere for companionship. This external influence leads Lucille to import voices from the town into the home: “Lucille had a familiar, Rosette Browne, whom she feared and admired, and through whose eyes she continually imagined she saw. Lucille was galled and wounded by her imagined disapprobation” (103). By in bringing these social voices, she further facilitates the destruction of the house’s privacy and isolation. She then seeks refuge by following conventional gender norms, cutting out dress patterns from magazines, eating lunch in the Home Economics room, and in general attempting to mold herself into the image that society would wish to see from a young woman.
So Sylvie’s welcoming of the outside world, and specifically darkness, into the house sparks a moment of conflict between Sylvie and Lucille. Lucille fights the darkness by turning on the overhead light, revealing the state of the kitchen:

We saw that we ate from plates that came in detergent boxes, and we drank from jelly glasses… the two cupboard doors which had come unhinged and were propped against the boxes of china … Most dispiriting, perhaps was the curtain on Lucille’s side of the table, which had been half consumed by fire once when a birthday cake had been set too close to it. Sylvie had beaten out the flames with a back issue of Good Housekeeping, but she had never replaced the curtain… “Where’s your husband, Sylvie?” (101)

This moment, told to us by Ruth but showing us Lucille’s perspective, demonstrates the divergence between the two sisters. Ruth’s reaction to seeing the kitchen in this state of relative chaos is to turn the lights off again. To Ruth’s mind, Lucille’s action and not Sylvie’s is the problem in this moment: “Lucille had startled us all” (101). After Sylvie leaves the kitchen, Ruth laments being “alone in the lighted kitchen with its blind black window” (102). Lucille, however, sees the restoration of light as a moment of clarity, not blindness—her reaction to the chaos is to, first, chastise Sylvie for her poor housekeeping, and then to clean the kitchen herself. Sylvie has clearly done a poor job of cleaning and maintaining the kitchen, despite the example set by her female relatives. The fact that she puts out a fire with the copy of Good Housekeeping is doubly bad, as she fails to use the tools given to her to fulfill her role and most likely burns the manual in the process. There are consequences to bad housekeeping—if one fails at housekeeping (so closely tied to motherhood), perhaps one fails in terms of femininity as a whole. For Lucille, Sylvie’s bad housekeeping calls into question her status as a married woman. Significantly, Lucille knows it is inappropriate to ask the question that she does, but as Lucille is the messenger from the outside world, she shares its values and
in this moment isolating the dangerous “other” is more important than courtesy. After this event, Lucille does the shopping and the cooking for the household, essentially challenging Sylvie’s position as housekeeper and head of house.

Lucille’s challenge and importation of the outer world have no effect on Ruth or Sylvie and until the intrusion is reinforced by visits from the sheriff, who in his official role speaks for the town. “On both occasions he stood in the front door and talked about the weather. Everything in his manner suggested the deepest embarrassment” (176). The sheriff is embarrassed, because even by arriving he is impinging on the private domain of the Foster women. This transgression is even more egregious because the Foster home has only women—and he feels the awkwardness of the situation, of a man, representing the public, imposing rule over a house which has always been the house of a woman, and which has had no male inhabitants for many decades. The needs of Fingerbone drive him there, to protect the house, but he cannot go farther—he cannot completely break the boundary between private and public so he remains outside, where the physical walls keep him. Although men do enter Sylvie’s house by the end of the novel, they do so only through a mediated experience: the clearest example is a woman who visits the house after the lake incident and “introduced her friend as the wife of the probate judge” (180). This line ends a paragraph, and so we are not told what Ruth thinks about this introduction or what it is supposed to mean…but we can well imagine that it is a thinly veiled threat, or rather assurance, that the legal system has entered the house, but it had to be done through the judge’s wife. Consequently, Sylvie and Ruth both know that the Sheriff’s visit, though he does not cross the physical boundary, marks the end of the solidity of the house; the final boundary will fall—must fall. It is only a matter of time.
The sheriff returns in a matter of days. Of the visit, Ruth says, “It is a terrible thing to break up a family. If you understand that, you understand everything that follows. The sheriff knew it as well as anyone, and his face was slack with regret. “There’ll be hearing, Mrs. Fisher” he said” (190). He comes with what was initially a threat, but now a promise, of removing Ruth from Sylvie’s care—and with this final invasion of the house by the public interest, he deals the final blow to the sanctity and sanctuary of the house. The public sphere, which Ruth thought “under no possible combination of circumstances” could ever enter the private, has broken the last boundary (103). The house, built to protect family, is left with no working foundation and no working walls, can no longer even maintain the family. It is no house at all, and the house is to continue as a concept, it must be transformed—so Ruth and Sylvie burn the house.
Transfiguring the Metaphysical

Intransigence

Sylvie and the sheriff break down the spatial boundaries of the house, allowing the surrounding environment of nature and town to creep in, but this alone does not free Ruth from the trauma of loss because it is not the physical structure that causes her pain. To Ruth, two boundaries still remain within the internal structure of the house and so she is still stuck in the house: the boundary between the living and the dead, and the boundary between the past and the present. To break these final boundaries and ultimately free herself from the house and the pain it engenders, Ruth must undo her own understanding of the house and create a new concept of domesticity.

Firstly, Ruth is stuck in a haunted space between the living and the dead. In this space, the ghosts of family members, and specifically the ghost of her dead mother, haunt her. Ruth attempts to ignore these ghosts, telling herself, “the nerves and the brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams of these specters…so familiar as to imply they should be permanent fixtures of the world, when in fact nothing is more perishable” (116). If the ghostly presence she sees and feels is nothing but a trick of the mind, then perhaps Ruth is not traumatized by grief. She cannot convince herself of this idea for long, however, so she considers a second alternative: that far from perishing, her mother is simply out of reach: “Often she almost slipped through any door I saw from the side of my eye, and it was she, and not changed, and not perished. She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished” (159-160). Ruth never catches a full glimpse of her mother—only ‘almost’ glimpses from the side of her eye, but these almost glimpses are enough for Ruth to see that her mother is simply “lost to the sense.” She senses the gap between the living and the dead and
searches for a way to bridge that gap, eventually refusing to leave the house with Lucille in the name of this search because “it seemed that something I had lost might be found in Sylvie’s house” (124). As Ruth’s ghosts reside in the house, perhaps the way to reach them will also be found in the house.

In attempting to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, Ruth turns to memory as an attempt to access the dead. Ruth asks Sylvie to recount memories of Helen, her mother, but Sylvie cannot remember any specific moments of importance. Ruth does not fault her for it: “I do not think Sylvie was merely reticent. It is, as she said, difficult to describe someone, since memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary as glimpses one has at night through lighted windows” (53). Memories are also inherently unstable: when Ruth herself attempts to remember her mother, she finds that “there was such similarity…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). So, though it seems counterintuitive, memory is fragmented and unstable and therefore incapable of actually recalling the dead. Moreover, memory itself increases the trauma of grief. As Sylvie explains to the women of the town, “Families should stay together. Otherwise things get out of control. My father, you know. I can’t even remember what he was like, I mean when he was alive. But ever since, it’s Papa here and Papa there” (186). The loss of Mr. Foster, an otherwise unimportant man, makes him all-important—his once forgettable presence becomes all encompassing. So it is with any loss; this is precisely what Sylvie fears when the sheriff, speaking for the town, threatens to remove Ruth. In doing so, the town would create an artificial break in the family where none is needed; Ruth and Sylvie are both alive, but splitting them would have the same effect on the one as if the other
had died. This break, more than the breach of the lake or the town, creates the “fragility of our household [which] was by now so great that the breach was inevitable” (188). Artificial break or not, the pain of loss is just as powerful. Ruth describes the trauma and pain of such a loss:

Sylvie did not want to lose me. She did not want me to grow gigantic and multiple, so that I seemed to fill the whole house, and she did not wish me to turn subtle and miscible, so that I could pass through the membranes that separate dream and dream. She did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence, silent and ungainly though I might be. For she could regard me without strong emotion…this was the measure of our intimacy, that she gave almost no thought to me at all. But if she lost me, I would become extraordinary by my vanishing (195).

Loss renders a person extraordinary. The ghostly remnants of a lost individual have powers that the living do not—a person’s presence becomes larger-than-life, filling the whole house; or, alternatively, it becomes small enough to slip into dreams and through doors: this is precisely what occurs with Helen, who becomes a monstrously large mother-figure who, at the same time, is always slipping out of reach. Memory reminds Ruth that her mother is gone, because she cannot make new memories of her mother: Helen is confined to the past. For this reason Sylvie does not wish to remember Ruth—to remember her signifies a need for memory, a lack of the unimportant ordinary, and a painful loss. When families are unnaturally broken, “there is so little to remember of anyone….every memory is turned over and over again…written in the heart in the hope that memory will fulfill itself, and become flesh, and that the wanderers will find a way home, and the perished, whose lack we always feel, will step through the door” (194-195). Bits and pieces are turned “over and over again,” in the futile hope that memory might somehow “become flesh”—but, being fragmented and unstable, memory cannot re-create life, so rather than relive the pain of loss, memory increases it, its immobility
serving as a reminder that the ghost is stuck in the past and can never cross over to the present. Rather than relieve the pain of loss, memory increases it because each moment recalled is rendered important.

Surrounded by her grandfather’s paintings in the house, Ruth next turns to images, as a more stable alternative to memory. In memory of her grandfather, Ruth studies his paintings and watercolors, and ever after she “was always reminded of pictures, images, in places where images never were, in marble, in the blue net veins at my wrists” (90). Ruth attempts to forge a bond with her grandfather and his inaccessible past by studying the visual images that he once produced and reproducing them on her wrists, essentially imprinting herself with a piece of his identity. However, this solution also falls short of her desired ideal—images can only be reproduced, yet nothing new is created. Moreover, as the images come from her grandfather, Ruth is reminded of the patriarchal structures that first created loss: “Cain, the image of God, gave the simple earth of the field a voice and a sorrow…So Cain was a creator, in the image of his Creator…Cain became his children and their children and theirs, through a thousand generations… everyone remembered that there had been a second creation, that the earth ran with blood and sang with sorrow” (193). Ruth conflates her grandfather’s reproductions with the breaking of the first family, and the reproduction of the sorrow that follows. For Ruth, then, though images are stable, they can only reflect loss; like memory, they remind Ruth of her grief rather than provide a method to overcome it.

Lastly, Ruth turns to dreams to overcome her trapped state in the house. Dreams, which neither belong to the past nor solely to the present, do have the ability to create. However, dreams are also inadequate solutions to the pain of loss because the creation
cannot be controlled; the dreamer has no autonomy over the story created. In fact, a
dream can create in precisely the way that a dreamer might hope to avoid. Ruth and
Lucille see Sylvie standing precariously on the bridge one day, as though she hoped to
jump or fall in. When questioned, Sylvie laughs and says she did it because she’s “always
wondered what that would be like” (84). This answer, of course, does not satisfy,
particularly as Sylvie leaves the house late at night and Ruth fears that Sylvie might one
day follow Helen’s course into the lake:

Such currents [of thought] pull one’s dreams after them, and one’s dread is always
mirrored upon the dread that inheres in things. For example, when Sylvie looked
over the bridge she must have seen herself in the water….but surely as we tried to
stay awake to know if she sang, or wept, or left the house, we fell asleep and
dreamed that she did (83).

Ruth does not want to think her aunt is suicidal, but the dark thoughts follow her into her
dreams, and the very dread she hopes to avoid become the created dream. The avoidance
of the dreaded thought is clear in the construction of her sentence. Ruth will only admit
that she stayed awake to know if Sylvie “sang, wept, or left the house”—nothing more.
Sylvie has already left the house to walk at night, so this fact needs no confirmation, in
dreams or otherwise. Ruth’s true dread, then, is that Sylvie means to “leave the house” in
the same manner that her own mother did—leaving the realm of the living and entering
the lake to be with the other dead. This is the dread that pulls Ruth’s dreams, and so she
always dreams that Sylvie does jump into the lake. So her dreams, rather than providing a
space for the past to come mingle in a created present or future, instead condemn her to new
images of loss. As they cannot be controlled, dreams also fail at solving the problem of
loss.
So image and memory are simply stagnant debris, “the small, unnoticed, unvalued clutter that was all that remained when [loved ones] vanished, that only catastrophe made notable” (116); and dreams, which can reach into the present and future, cannot be controlled and play tricks on us; and none of these three can free Ruth from her grief. As these tools of representation ultimately fail to create the access to ghosts that Ruth longs for, Ruth must invent a new method: “The force behind the movement of time is a mourning that will not be comforted. That is why the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last is hoped to be a reconciliation and return. So memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory” (192). Again, we see that breaking the family through any means is akin to a kind of death—an expulsion from the house creates the same pain as a more permanent loss, and this pain cycles on through time. This is the trauma of permanent impermanence. However, Ruth envisions a solution through a “reconciliation and return” that will bridge the gap between the living and the dead, and between past and future. In this solution, “brilliant memory” can be prophecy; so memory must be made moveable. If there could be a way to create new memories even after loss, to blur the lines between the dead and living, or rather, to allow memory to flow and ebb across the past, present, and future, time would not stall, ghosts would not haunt, and families would not be broken. Through these envisioned solutions, Ruth is already testing out her skills as creator, but the intransigence of memories, images, and dreams block her from escaping the pain of the house.

Transfiguration

Ruth finally escapes the pain of the house through transfiguration. She first uses this term when considering the effects of her mother’s death: had Helen not driven into the lake, “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” (198). In breaking the family, the sorrow is released and thus enters Ruth’s life. Helen, however, releases herself from the sorrow: she leaves the confinements of normal life that have so plagued her, and enters the realm of the dead. Then, in Ruth’s perception, she is elevated, and grows enormous and extraordinary in her absence. Ruth continues to develop her understanding of transfiguration through a vision of the lake resurrected. We know that Ruth sees Lake Fingerbone as a sort of purgatory, containing all the lake’s dead and then some. After finding her aunt Molly’s missionary brochures, she has a vision of a giant, general resurrection, in the form of a net harvesting the entire world:

It must, finally, sweep the black floor of Fingerbone, too...[There would] arise a great army of Paleolithic and Neolithic frequenters of the lake ...in such a crowd my mother would hardly seem remarkable...There would be a general reclaiming of fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles...till time and error and accident were undone, and the world became comprehensible and whole...Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added it to 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 would be inevitable...What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally? (91-92)

This net lifts from watery depths every soul that has died (and lived) in the lake, including Ruth’s family members. The grand resurrection undoes the pain of loss, as Ruth’s mother is no longer ‘remarkable’—she can return to a state of ordinariness that needs no memory, thus releasing Ruth from her currently inescapable and extraordinary presence. However, before this ascension can be achieved, there must first be a fragmentation, a breaking apart. For just as the law of completion will ultimately make the world whole, “it was [also] the order of the world...that water should pry through the
seams of husks, which, pursued and tight as they might be, are only made for breaching. It was the order of the world that the shell should fall away” (162).

So the dead of Fingerbone and the world end up in the lake, and in the black waters of its depths, the human shell falls away. This fragmentation of the self leaves “buttons and misplaced spectacles” on the lake floor and all is dissolved because “darkness is the only solvent…it seemed to [Ruth] there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent” (116). Perfect darkness, then, seems to undo the personal past. Without remnants, mementos, memories or traces of our ancestors, family history falls away. Ruth, we recall, introduces herself by reciting her family history, so its erasure is all the more destructive to her identity. Yet a lack of family history means she feels no pain of loss—for this reason, Ruth finds peace in the darkness. Darkness also undoes identity. After Sylvie has invited darkness into the house, the girls seem to lose their sense of self: “Deprived of all perspective and horizon,” Ruth remembers, “I found myself reduced to an intuition, and my sister and aunt to something less than that. I was afraid to put out my hand, for fear it would touch nothing, or to speak, for fear no one would answer…Sylvie patted my shoulder. “It’s all right, Lucille.” “I’m not Lucille,” I said” (70). The darkness undoes the self, unmakes the human, so that even Ruth’s body disappears: she dares not reach out her hand or extend her voice, for fear of confirming her lost human-ness. She is reduced to “an intuition,” and Sylvie and Lucille are even less. Without a personal history to ground itself and no personal identity to define itself, the human self-disintegrates to remnants and fragments, which are not needed in absolute darkness. However, transfiguration is not achieved by remaining in the fragmented
remains of identity; after the fragmentation there comes “a final [birth], which would free us from watery darkness and the thought of watery darkness (162). An inevitable ascension takes place, bringing the dead out of purgatory and reuniting broken families. This is the final birth that Ruth foretells, full of reconciliation and return—transfiguration solves the problem of loss.

Of course, this vision of the lake’s transfiguration is just that—a vision—but we can read, in Ruth’s interpretation of the lake’s resurrection a method for transfiguration. From this vision we learn that the process of transfiguration first requires a fragmentation, which leads to darkness. In darkness, humanity and individuality are undone, until finally the fragments are knit up in a final birth, made whole again, and ascend to transfiguration. Undoing humanity, as Ruth explains, is a fearful process, so, to ease the process of disintegration. Destruction of the self is unnatural and terrifying, but houses decay all the time. Even Ruth’s grandmother’s house might fall at any moment: “the appearance of relative solidity in my grandmother’s house was deceptive. It was an impression created by the piano, and the scrolled couch, and the bookcases... I could easily imagine the piano crashing to the cellar floor with a thrum of all its strings...[And] if it fell while we were sleeping, we would plummet disastrously through the dark” (150). If the self is like the house, and the house looks solid but may easily fall, then perhaps the similarly solid self might break in a smooth fashion. This correlation between the house and the self recalls a similar correlation upon which the traditional understanding of domesticity hinges: the house is a woman’s domain because, according to the theory of separate spheres, there is something inherently feminine about the ‘safe’ space of the house; femininity, in fact, is so tied to the home that, as Ruskin describes, a proper
woman carries a sense of the domestic with her wherever she goes. In creating Ruth’s internal ‘house’ that is then destroyed, Robinson is breaking the link between Ruth and her ancestral home.

Ruth’s transfiguration begins when she and Sylvie visit a hidden valley in the mountains. The valley has the remnants of an old abandoned homestead, but Ruth can feel the presence of ghost children, the house’s inhabitants, surrounding her:

Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them. You simply say, “Here are the perimeters of our attention”…Anyone with one solid human bond is that smug, and it is that smugness as much as the comfort and safety that lonely people covet and admire. I had been, so to speak, turned out of house now long enough to have observed this in myself. Now there was neither threshold nor sill between me and these cold, solitary children who almost breathed against my check and almost touched my hair (154).

It is no accident that Ruth thinks first of a “sister or friend”—she and Sylvie take this trip to the hidden valley the morning after Lucille leaves the house for good, and Ruth “had no sister after that night” (140). So the pain and loneliness of an unnatural loss is fresh in her mind, and she uses the metaphor of darkness to explain her feelings. Ruth peers in to this metaphorical lighted house, but cannot enter, for she has been “turned out of house.” The pain of loss comes from the separation from the other person, so once again the issue is one of boundaries. This scene also focuses specifically on the boundary between life and death: like her mother’s ghostly presence, which “almost” steps through doors, these ghost children “almost” breath and “almost” touch her hair—but never truly do, because they are ghosts. Having been “turned out of house,” with “neither threshold nor sill,” Ruth begins to fall apart. She describes this process as one of a house deteriorating. Frustrated that the ghost children seem to taunt her with so many “almost”s, Ruth thinks, “sometime it will be dark. I thought, Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry
this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone, and I would rather be with them, if only to see them” (159). The self is the house; it is her own life that keeps her from the children, so her skin serves as the boundary separating her spirit from theirs. With the coming of the darkness, she invites the children to undo this boundary—to pry apart her skin, to break her into pieces. Ruth’s conception of self as house extends beyond simply her flesh: “Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts, and would like to break the roof, spine, and ribs, and smash the windows and flood the floor and spindle the curtains and bloat the couch” (158).

Ruth continues to break down the ‘walls’ of her being, until at last there is no separation left. On the night of her escape, Ruth hides in the yard as the sheriff speaks to Sylvie: “I learned an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort… I could feel that I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one” (204). Like the darkness before, Ruth allows the cold of the night air to enter completely, and by finally undoing her human boundaries, she removes the pain of that separation—the same will be true of the pain of loss. Finally, by breaking the tethers of need, Ruth lets go of her former human life.

Having broken these human bonds, Ruth is reduced to fragments, then reborn and built anew. The newly made ‘spirit-Ruth’ observes the house and considers being forced back from transience:

Once there was a young girl strolling at night in an orchard…. A door stood open, so she walked inside. It would be that kind of story, a very melancholy story… She would be transformed by the gross light into a mortal child. And when she stood at the bright window, she would find that the world was gone, the orchard was gone, her mother and grandmother and aunts were gone… And those outside would scarcely know her, so sadly was she changed. Before, she had been fleshed
in air and clothed in nakedness and mantled in cold, and her bones were only slender things, like shafts of ice. She had haunted the orchard out of preference, but she could walk into the lake without ripple or displacement... And now, lost to her kind, she would almost forget them, and she would feed coarse food to her coarse flesh, and be almost satisfied. (204)

Spirit-Ruth imagines reentering the house, which would be “a very melancholy story,” for doing so would require not transfiguration, which elevated her to spirit-hood, but a “transformation” back into a mortal life. This life, which she has just denounced, is a life without her mother, grandmother, and aunts—now including Sylvie; life without transfiguration, as we know, is marred by the pain of loss. Her previous life is a life unsatisfied: like the ghost children, she is only “almost” able to forget the spirits of her family, and only ever “almost” satisfied—the remaining human boundaries will never allow her to escape the pain of loss, and therefore she cannot be truly satisfied. However, the newly-formed Spirit-Ruth is free: she is now “fleshed in air” and, no longer haunted by the ghosts she could not reach, she herself now “haunts the orchard.” She has ascended from bound human to free spirit—no boundaries separate her from her family, and thus she feels no pain of loss.

So Ruth, as emerging artist figure, has freed herself from the pain of loss and has found a saving grace through the impersonal darkness, but she still belongs to the house, and so her first creative act is to destroy, then transfigure, the house. Even before Ruth is transfigured, the house shows signs of change. After Sylvie’s housekeeping and the sheriff’s intervention, the house is left with no working foundations and no working walls—not much of a house at all; it has failed in its purpose. Yet Ruth instinctively feels that “the ruin we rode upon was meant for greater things,” and she notices some telling signs of imminent transfiguration (162). One morning Ruth observes the house from the
yard: “the lawn was knee high, an oily, dank green, and the wind sent ripples across it…it had risen to the height of the foundation. And it seemed that if the house were not to founder, it must soon begin to float” (124-125). The great flood (which never fully recedes in the novel) has turned the yard into a swampy, fluid place and the physical foundation no longer seems sufficiently stable. Ruth, witnessing this destruction, envisions a newly transformed house from this wreckage: the house must become a ship. “Imagine that Noah knocked his house apart and used the planks to build an ark, while his neighbors looked on,” Ruth tells the reader, “A house, he must have told them, should be daubed with pitch and built to float cloud high.... A lettuce patch was of no use at all, and a good foundation was worse than useless. A house should have a compass and a keel” (184). Noah is the first to reincarnate the house. He builds his ship/house to save himself from a great flood—not unlike the circumstances that stimulate transfiguration. So the house needs no garden and no foundation if it can float and steer—it must be adaptable, it must be able to move, and most importantly, it must move where the captain steers. The house finally undergoes transfiguration on the same night that Ruth does: as she accepts the cold and is finally fragmented, she looks at the house, which appeared “large, and foreign, and contained, like a moored ship—a fantastic thing to find in a garden. I could not imagine going into it” (203). In the darkness, the house where Ruth has grown up is foreign to her. Having failed in its purpose the house has broken down to planks, and now in the darkness is ready for rebirth. It is a “moored” ship, so it still has not achieved its greater fate—it needs only freedom from containment to set sail. Ruth sees all this and “cannot imagine going into it,” but minutes later she herself has been transfigured into Spirit Ruth, and this spirit happily enters and frees the house:
Imagine the spirit of the house breaking out the windows and knocking down the doors, and all the neighbors astonished at the sovereign ease with which it burst its tomb ... Every last thing would turn to flame and ascend, so cleanly would the soul of the house escape, and all Fingerbone would come marveling to see the smoldering place where its foot had last rested. (211-212)

Spirit-Ruth enters the house and breaks her own tomb. The house that had been a place of continuous inescapable trauma is now free to escape the cycle pain, because it is fully transfigured—it has been transformed, and has become a ship. So the town may come and look at the old foundations because the house has left: “now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping” (209). No longer must Sylvie and Ruth maintain boundaries and conform to expectation: the home is freed from constraints, boundaries torn asunder, and its inhabitants set free. In this new house, domesticity does not bind the woman to any one place—in fact, she may direct it herself. Ruth has become a spirit, the house has become a ship, and both may now wander, for transfiguration ends in transience.

Transience

Fingerbone, we remember, is a difficult place to live. Those without strong foundations, like the other widows from the train crash, find it easier to live elsewhere, “so diaspora threatened always...so every wanderer whose presence suggested it might be as well to drift, or [that] it could not matter much,” threatens the very existence of the town (178). The very concept of transience defies roots and a stable home, so Fingerbone finds even the hints of Ruth and Sylvie’s freedom of movement deeply troubling. The sheriff makes his visit not because Ruth has been skipping school, but because Ruth and Sylvie return from their trip to the ghost valley “in a freight car. Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient out of me. Fingerbone was moved to solemn pity,” and a constant flow of the town’s wives cycle in through the house,
alternately attempting to convince Ruth and Sylvie that Ruth should stay with someone else (177). Is the town right to worry? Does transience come at too high a cost? Ruth’s letting go of humanity and breaking the tethers of need might indeed have sinister connotations—and these connotations, combined with the image of the lake as purgatory, can lead to the conclusion that Ruth, rather than undergoing transfiguration, has actually died. Perhaps she feels no distance between herself and ghosts because she has become one. If the lake is purgatory, and purgatory ascends through transfiguration, perhaps Ruth has reunited with her mother in heaven. Robinson has admitted to purposefully creating the possibility: “for all that people know at the end of the book, the worst might have happened” (qtd. in Kaivola 672). Ruth, however, explicitly states that she does not desire heaven: “dawn and its excesses always reminded me of heaven, a place where I have always known I would not be comfortable” (149). Ruth is only dead in the eyes of the town, which in the name of self-preservation, views transients as one might view ghosts: “they were like the people in old photographs—we did not see them through a veil of knowledge and habit, but simply and plainly—Like the dead, [the town] could consider their histories complete, and we wondered only what had brought them to transiency” (179). By the end of the novel, Ruth has joined their ranks: she is “like the dead,” but only in the sense that the town no longer sees her as a person. The town chooses to view these individuals as “simple, plain” beings that pass through Fingerbone and then perish—in doing so, they willfully ignore any ‘knowledge’ or ‘habit’ or any other markings of an individual. Because the transients do not belong to the town and have no home to maintain, the town has no interest in them; because their stories are not controlled by the town, Fingerbone decides that “their histories are complete.”
Ruth has not died; she has become a spirit, and therefore seems to occupy a liminal space between life and death. In this liminal space, “what perished need not also be lost” (124)—so Ruth can cross back and forth between both, having finally broken the boundary between life and death. Ruth and Sylvie are both alive, travelling through “Fingerbone on the way to Butte or Billings or Deer Lodge,” to see friends, and dead, wondering “what if I should walk to the house one night and find Lucille there? It is possible. Since we are dead, the house would be hers now” (216). Lucille, on the other hand, has not been transfigured and has not escaped the house. Ruth imagines her there, “stalemating the forces of ruin,” still clinging to order and boundaries and finding no comfort in either (216). Because she has not achieved transience, she still suffers greatly from the pain of loss. If she is not in the house, she might be sitting at a café in Boston:

Her water glass has left two-thirds of a ring on the table, and she works at completing the circle with her thumbnail. Sylvie and I do not flounce in...My mother, likewise, is not there, and my grandmother in her house slippers with her pigtail wagging, and my grandfather...We are nowhere in Boston. However Lucille may look, she will never find us there, or any trace or sign...No one watching this woman smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger...could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie. (218-219)

Lucille is engrossed by the incomplete circle of moisture on the table because it mirrors a circle that she can never complete; she has not bridged the gap between life and death, so she is forever thronged by the absence of those who’ve gone. She “does not watch,” listen, wait, or hope—but of course she does, that is all she does. In pushing away her memories and thoughts of her absent family members, she suffers all the more. Like the cold, the only way to neutralize the pain is to let it overcome you. Lucille, of course, is too much a lover of order to ever allow for such chaos and lack of control, and so she is
condemned to suffer the pain of the house, even if she does not live in it. She has not deconstructed the ‘internal house,’ and is therefore still tied to domesticity regardless of where she physically goes.

Lucille is not free of the house even in Boston, but Ruth, no longer belonging to the house, is free to return as she wishes. She physically returns to Fingerbone when passing through to other locations, but she also visits Lucille’s house in spirit: “If Lucille is there, Sylvie and I have stood outside her window a thousand times…we have brought in leaves, and flung the curtains and tipped the bud vase, and somehow left the house again before she could run downstairs, leaving behind us a strong smell of lake water” (218). Just as Sylvie first realized that boundaries must be broken to combat the loss in the house, Ruth now takes it upon herself to introduce a bit of disorder and a bit of the outside world into Lucille’s stagnant, pristine one where she has been “waiting there in a fury of righteousness, cleaning and polishing, all these years” (217). Because Ruth is free to go, she is also free to return, finally putting an end to expulsion.

Ruth is also free from the town, and her story does not belong to them. Had she stayed, her story would most likely have continued the cycle of pain, as *Housekeeping* is full of stories about women and loss. Ruth remembers her grandmother feeling “that sharp loneliness that she had felt every long evening since she was a child…Old women she had known, first her grandmother and then her mother, rocked on their porches in the evenings and sang sad songs, and did not wish to be spoken to” (18). This unspoken loneliness travels down through time, affecting every woman in her lineage—her grandmother’s grandmother down to her own mother. The loneliness comes from permanent impermanence; from expulsion, and the fact that children are forever leaving.
Although Sylvie is not herself a mother, she too tells stories like this because the pain from permanent impermanence resides in the house, so it applies universally to women in the house. Sylvie recalls a friend so terrified of losing her daughter that she “couldn’t take her eyes off her. She wouldn’t let [the little girl] go outside, or play with other children…and if the little girl cried she cried too” (67). In the end, however, her efforts fail and she loses her daughter anyway. Ruth, however, having escaped this permanent impermanence and undone expulsion, is free to write a new story.

In fact, as Ruth is now a transient spirit with no foundation or boundaries, she must write a story, or risk disappearing entirely. Ruth notes that Noah is remembered and honored in the bible, but “Noah’s wife…would have left it to her sons to tell the tedious tale of generations. She was a nameless woman…never missed, [she was] commemorated, [but her] death was not remarked” (172). Because Noah’s wife leaves her sons the task of telling her story, she is nameless and has lost her identity. We know she exists and she is therefore commemorated, but only for being Noah’s wife—beyond that, we know nothing. This is the fate that awaits Ruth if she cannot tell her own story, because the power to speak and tell stories matters, something that Ruth doesn’t realize until its almost too late. When reading the novel, we as readers are unaware just how close to disappearing Ruth really is because we see the entire story through her eyes.

Sylvie, however, does not, and she reveals to us Ruth’s near vanishing:

Sylvie said “I’m glad to have a chance to talk to you. You’re so quiet, it’s hard to know what you think.” Sylvie had stood up, and we began to walk towards home. “I suppose I don’t know what I think.” This confession embarrassed me. 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. But my allusion to this feeling of ghostliness sounded peculiar, and sweat started all over my body, convicting me on the spot of gross corporeality. (106)
Ruth’s silence leaves her “invisible, incomplete, and minimally existent”—in not speaking and creating a story, she forfeits identity, autonomy, and perhaps even life. Transience transforms Ruth to a spirit, but the silence threatens to make her a ghost—a state of being far closer to death, like the ghost children she encounters on the mountain. Silence might be a learned behavior for Ruth, as we recall that her grandmother’s house was silent; but Sylvie, who breaks convention and the boundaries of the house, knows that a silence does not guarantee peace. The importance of story and speech comes slowly to Ruth, but finally she recognizes that “words, too, must be salvaged…it seemed obvious…things were held in place, are held in place, by a web of words” (200). Ruth herself needs words to guarantee her existence, to hold her life in place so that she does not disappear.

So Ruth becomes a storyteller, and *Housekeeping* itself is her story, her reclaiming of her own existence. Told from some unknown future, Ruth recounts the past and in the telling of it, she flexes her skills as a storyteller. Throughout the novel, Ruth repeatedly uses the words “perhaps” and “say,” as though testing out different options for a person’s thoughts or feelings. In general, she does this when describing the members of her family who have passed away. For example, “Perhaps from a sense of delicacy my grandmother never asked us anything about our life with our mother. Perhaps she was not curious. Perhaps she was so affronted by Helen’s secretive behavior that even now she refused to take notice of it. Perhaps she did not wish to learn by indirection what Helen did not wish to tell her” (20). As Ruth cannot ask her grandmother in person why they never spoke of Helen, Ruth must create her own reasons, envisioning what her grandmother must have thought. In this same vein, Ruth recreates entire scenes in her
mind of events that must have happened, but have not been told to her personally: “One
day my grandmother must have carried out a basket of sheets to hang in the spring
sunlight…Say there were two or three inches of old hard snow on the ground…That
wind! she would say… In a month she would not mourn, because in that season it had
never seemed to here that they were married” (17). Through both of these tactics, Ruth is
creating imagined memory—she is breaking the boundary between past and present.
Previously, Ruth suffered from the fact that the past is inaccessible and unchangeable, but
through storytelling the past can be created, explained, and understood. No longer is there
a need for the stagnant memory of little, unimportant moments because through story
memory can be fluid, and can touch the present. In saving herself from ghostliness, Ruth
breaks the final boundary; through storytelling she can inhabit both the past and the
present, as a spirit she can travel between death and life, as a transient she is free from the
house and has freed the house.
Conclusion: Towards Stationary Transience

By becoming a storyteller, Ruth has completed her journey to artist figure, and just as Woolf and Friedan postulated, this creative energy has freed her from the confines of the house. Like her own author Marilynne Robinson, and so many women writers before her, Ruth uses her talents to write about the house and to destroy the system that had previously constrained her. Ruth, in her telling of her own story, destroys the house, but in its stead she creates a new theory of domesticity. If the traditional theory of domesticity is safe, feminine, ordered, and subject to male authority, Ruth’s vision of domesticity is adventurous, inconstant and unpredictable, and revolves entirely around female authority: Ruth’s reimagined ship-house has a compass, to orient towards new lands, and a keel, to keep it oriented and afloat. These are all the tools she needs to decide her own way, to follow her own path, to tell her own story. This freedom of movement undoes the pain of the house, because families need not be broken: if the ‘house’ can move with its inhabitants, than every soul need not be put out of house.

Has Robinson truly solved the problem of expulsion in Housekeeping? We know that Ruth is free to return to the house, but because she is a transient, perhaps she is not free to stay. There exists a worrying implication that the floating state, now a safe space for Ruth, becomes the only safe space, thereby condemning her to a life of movement. This would deny her certain aspects of life that require stability, such as motherhood. Has Ruth then simply switched prisons, the first a house and the second a ship?

If so, then we must read Ruth’s liberation as a possible solution to the problem, but not the only solution. If Ruth has chosen a life of transience and anomaly, we must accept that Lucille has also chosen, and has simply chosen differently. Lucille may suffer occasionally in her life of expectation, but perhaps Ruth, too, suffers from constant
mobility. In fact, if *Housekeeping* teaches us anything, it is that polarizing contradictions leads only to pain. Darkness and light, past and present, life and death—the whole of *Housekeeping* aims at removing the space and the boundaries between opposing forces. If stillness and movement are two dichotomies that follow this same pattern, then both Ruth and Lucille have found only temporary solutions to pain. The true solution, the ideal state, would be something in between, a somehow stationary transience. Is this even possible? Ruth actually hints towards this concept when thinking of Sylvie: “It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave” (103). The end of the novel does not result in this stationary transience, as both Ruth and Sylvie leave and adopt a life of total transience.

Why would Robinson write a novel about liberation that does achieve true freedom? Perhaps it was deliberate, an attempt to gain the middle ground showing the world the complete opposite: having seen the woman stuck in the house for centuries, we now see a woman completely free from it, and from the two extremes we can conceive of a possible middle ground. More likely, however, is that this topic of the woman in the house is an ongoing negotiation that feminists, even now, have yet to resolve. Thirty five years after *Housekeeping* was published, leading second-wave feminist Gloria Steinem published her book *My Life on the Road*. In this autobiographical account, Steinem describes how, through all her years of writing and organizing to empower women, she herself lived a transient life that was unavailable to the women she talked about. Yet Steinem ends her book not on the road, but with an afterword called “Coming Home.” In the afterword, Steinem admits to herself that this transient life was an unbalanced one, and that she did suffer from a lack of home. It was not until she turned fifty that she
focused on creating a sense of home for herself, and it liberated her: “Now that being on the road was my choice, not my fate, I lost the melancholy feeling of Everybody has a home but me…Instead of either/or, I discovered a whole world of and” (Steinem 250). Steinem might recognize much of her younger self in the character of Ruth, so perhaps achieving stationary transience requires time, or the benefit of a more current, third-wave feminist perspective.

Steinem ends her book with a direct message to the reader about abandoning the rigid gender roles of the past: “My father did not have to trade dying alone for the joys of the road. My mother did not have to give up a journey of her own to have a home. Neither do I. Neither do you” (Steinem 251). These final words are also a call to personal action: negotiating the role of the woman in the house is an ongoing project, but it is one in which the woman may now participate as well. It is the task and the privilege of the 21st century woman to define her own role, a privilege we owe to the generations of women who worked and wrote for centuries to undo the damage of separate spheres and dreamed of creating a better society.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


