

**“She Preferred it Sunk in the Very Element it Was Meant
to Exclude’: Making Sense of Nature and Sisterhood in
Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*”**

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Excerpt

In Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, nature, as it relates to the environment, is given a unique power to challenge what is considered natural in human society. The ecological environment of Fingerbone, the town in which the novel takes place, interacts with the manmade sphere, bringing up questions of convention, place, identity, and most intriguingly, sisterhood. Nature’s dynamic presence serves to reflect and influence the bond shared between Ruth and Lucille, two biological sisters in the novel. Upon the entrance of their aunt Sylvie, nature takes on new meaning and accentuates the withering away of Ruth and Lucille’s sisterhood by revealing Sylvie’s unique status as a force of nature. Sylvie unearths, literally and abstractly, Ruth and Lucille’s foundation by allowing the domestic to collapse into the natural. This blurring of the line between the house and its natural, chaotic environment repels Lucille but frees Ruth, drawing her closer to her aunt Sylvie. Ironically, nature ultimately points to the weakness of natural, sisterly bonds in the face of sisterhood that is created from similar tastes in “housekeeping.”

Before delving into the core argument of this paper, it is helpful to define a few terms. Because of nature’s fluctuating depiction in the narrative, nature as a concept is complicated and multidimensional. This is the result of differing attitudes toward nature and ecology exemplified by the characters in the novel. For the purpose of highlighting and understanding these differing attitudes, I would like to introduce the terms Nature and nature. On the one hand, Nature (with an uppercase “N”), in a traditional and Romantic sense, is the network of living communities or environmental phenomena that are not manmade—plants, animals, and

weather.¹ This definition applies to Lucille's interpretation of ecology and the environment. Nature is external to the human and better understood as an aesthetic—something to go *to* rather than live *in*. Throughout the novel, Lucille attempts to keep Nature out of the house. When the house floods shortly after Sylvie's arrival, she tries to rid her living room of the water by letting it flow back into Nature where it belongs: "Lucille pulled the front door open and the displacement she caused made one end of the woodpile in the porch collapse and tipped a chair...Lucille stood at the door, looking out." Lucille is unsettled by Nature's invasion of the home, for it does not belong. She prefers "looking out" at Nature, rather than to interact with it in the domestic space (Robinson 64). Lucille's behavior displays her preference to keep the domestic and the Natural clearly divided.

In this same scene, Sylvie and Ruth treat water much differently, exemplifying the second and opposite treatment of ecology I sense in the novel. When the water floods the first story of the house, Sylvie and Ruth dance in the water "through six grand waltz steps," as if they celebrate nature's presence in the household (Robinson 64). This celebration gives way to my second definition of nature in the novel, a definition inspired by author Timothy Morton's treatment of nature in his book *Ecology Without Nature*; nature (with a lowercase "n") is a more holistic concept of environment. It is a combination of the manmade and the natural world. It is the general environment in which the characters exist: "[Nature] is both the set and the contents of the set. It is both the world and the entities in that world" (Morton 18). Morton's assertion applies to Robinson's novel quite well, for it offers great insight into Sylvie's

¹ I am basing my understanding of how Romanticism relates to Nature off of Yale University Professor David Bromwich's work in *Raritan*, "A Note On The Romantic Self." In his article, Bromwich states, "When in Romantic writing one encounters the word nature, it almost never means to draw a circle around rivers, mountains, forests, and the other constituents of the living world....To acknowledge such elemental forms as outside the human frame of things could only mean to adopt them as symbols of the integrity of things-as-they-are. Yet a leading premise of Romanticism is that one can hardly think even of natural objects without insensibly connecting them with an idea of things as they ought to be." Bromwich points to the Romanticist's inability to understand Nature without the bias of the human consciousness. The aestheticization of Nature is thus an attempt to better understand Nature as a subject rather than an extension of the human. With these categories in place, the Romanticist over simplifies Nature to keep it at a fathomable distance.

housekeeping. Sylvie's unconventional openness to natural phenomena is not a domestic laziness, but a different take on what is permissible in the domestic space. Sylvie does not wish to make a distinction between the ecological environment, or "the set" as it is defined by Morton, and society, or "the contents of the set" (Morton 18). The opposition between Sylvie and Ruth and Lucille is exacerbated by these conflicting views on Nature and nature, for they reflect each character's larger social and existential outlook—elements that eventually inspire the separation of the biological sisters.

Before Sylvie leaves her mark on Ruth and Lucille, the girls view Nature as something completely separate from the domestic space. Nature exists as a place of escape from social responsibility and a site of mourning and exploration. Nature is a space where the sisters attempt to make sense of their tragic past, namely the death of their mother, for they see it as a symbol of regeneration and creative potential. In other words, Nature is a place of hope. This is seen in the opening moments of the novel when the sisters build a snow woman:

The third day the snow was so dense and malleable that we made a sort of statue. We put one big ball of snow on top of another, and carved them down with kitchen spoons till we had made a figure of a woman in a long dress, her arms folded....And while in any particular she seemed crude and lopsided, altogether her figure suggested a woman standing in a cold wind. It seemed that we had conjured a presence. (Robinson 60-61)

Ruth and Lucille's "crude and lopsided" snow creation is reminiscent of an imperfect mother figure. Without the comfort of their own mother, they feel compelled to compensate by "[conjuring] a presence" that stands in place of what they no longer have. While this "presence" is in actuality an innocent snow woman, it seems Ruth and Lucille's intention was to mourn the loss of something deeper—their lack of motherly guidance. What is perhaps most interesting about the scene is how the girls use Nature as the site of their mourning. The sisters repurpose Nature such that it provides a space for grieving. Nature exists as a sort of blank slate on which the sisters can project their inner emotional desires. Without Sylvie's influence, the girls choose

to venture outside of the house in order to cope with the history they share and have endured as sisters.

As Sylvie enters the novel, Nature slowly becomes nature. Her presence promotes a more holistic view of environmental surroundings, a view Ruth and Lucille had not entertained in the past. Sylvie views nature as a general environment that is not sectioned off into clean categories of what is human and what belongs to society, or what belongs to nature and is part of the landscape. Nature (with a lowercase “n”) is thus everything. Sylvie’s open-door policy with natural phenomena encourages Ruth and Lucille to repurpose their interactions with the environment that surrounds them. Nature is no longer something to be explored *outside* of the home, a place of memory, celebration, and exploration, but an extension of the home. In her essay “The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*,” Karen Kaivola similarly analyzes Sylvie’s inability to separate the house “from a tendency toward chaos,” noting that the house “becomes coextensive with the outside world,” as if the home and nature maintained a kind of symbiosis (Kaivola 680). Sylvie’s house inspires different reactions in Ruth and Lucille, applying great tension to the sisterly bond between them. Nature’s domestic disruption erodes the orderly aesthetic of the home, providing Lucille with physical evidence of Sylvie’s far from convention style of keeping house:

The tables and chairs and cupboards and doors had been painted a rich white, layer on layer, year after year, but now the last layer had ripened to the yellow of turning cream. Everywhere the paint was chipped and marred. A great shadow of soot loomed up the wall and across the ceiling above the stove, and the stove pipe and the cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust. 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. (Robinson 101)

It is as if Sylvie is a force of nature and the house is being weathered by her storm. With this storm, the home’s history, elegantly represented metaphorically in the “layer on layer, year after year” of white paint, changes course, taking a turn toward severe domestic disorder. As the paint discolors and chips, the countertops lose their shine to a film of soot, and the window

treatments display their caustic ruin, Sylvie's storm rages on and begins to destroy not only the look of the home but its more abstract emotional contents. The home's aesthetic decay mirrors the unseen deterioration of the relationship between the two sisters. The house, under Sylvie's control, no longer gives the sisters a common thread or a foundation to share. Instead, the home gives them a reason to abandon their sisterhood. The burned curtain on "Lucille's side of the table" foreshadows the growing difference between the sisters by pointing to Lucille's developing dissatisfaction with Sylvie's housekeeping. Lucille's trust in Sylvie's house withers away like the fibers of a delicate curtain in the face of a ruthless force of nature. With the withering away of the bond shared between Ruth and Lucille, their family history is called into question and ultimately erased, making room for the budding connection between Ruth and Sylvie. Ruth and Lucille's family history is dark and tragic, while Ruth and Sylvie's future is hopeful

The relevance of family history as a concept is also challenged in Robinson's narrative and is interwoven into the discussion of ecological environment and its relationship to housekeeping. Ruth and Lucille's family history contributes to their initial grasp on the Natural because it gives them a reason to interact with and make sense of Natural phenomena. It is not surprising that history affects their present dealings, for it exerts a direct influence on their construction of memory, a faculty that contains immense power in the novel and is deeply rooted in Robinson's Natural descriptions. Robinson emphasizes the patterns that arise in Ruth and Lucille's family history to create what Julianne Fowler calls in her dissertation, "Family Narrative and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: Reading and Writing Beyond Boundaries," a "tapestry of stories" that is employed as a "structural device that [invokes] reading involvement in the text" (Fowler 21). This involvement allows the reader to share the memories of the sisters, namely Ruth because of her status of the narrator, so they may find themselves invested in and even a part of the family.

Works Cited

Bromwich, David. "A Note On the Romantic Self." *Raritan* 14.4 (n.d.): n. pag. Web.

Fellow Commentary

Lekha Kanchinadam

Lexi Tollefson read *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson for the first time as a senior in high school and loved it enough to write a final paper about it. Three years later as an English major college, Lexi revisited *Housekeeping* for her first independent research project. What resulted from this years-long relationship is Lexi’s 22-page paper “‘She Preferred it Sunk in the Very Element it Was Meant to Exclude’: Making Sense of Nature and Sisterhood in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*.”

The depth of Lexi’s relationship with *Housekeeping* matches her analysis of it. Her paper proposes an irony at the center of the novel: that a force of “nature” (Aunt Sylvie) helps replace a “natural” bond between biological sisters (Lucille and Ruth) with a bond of “constructed sisterhood” between two nonsisters (Sylvie and Ruth). Not only is this claim arguable in itself, but Lexi invents her own mini-lexicon in order to prove it. She introduces the key terms “Nature” (with a capital “N”), and “nature” and grounds her analysis in her unique definition of each. In other words, her key terms are arguments in themselves, and her paper is all the more rich for this layering.

This is a lot of ground to cover in a paper, let alone a short introduction—but Lexi navigates this challenge by focusing on her newly invented key terms and making them do double and triple duty: in explaining and defending her key terms of Nature and nature, she *also* introduces a main theoretical source *and* characterizes each of the three main characters.

Apart from key terms, Lexi also works her thesis into the structure of the introduction nicely. The first mention of her thesis comes very early on—right at the end of the first paragraph. But this iteration is just a taste of what comes later:

Ironically, nature ultimately points to the weakness of natural, sisterly bonds in the face of sisterhood that is created from similar tastes in “housekeeping.”

After this paragraph, Lexi launches into her definition and argument for “Nature” vs. nature. After she establishes these important players, she restates her thesis:

The opposition between Sylvie and Ruth and Lucille is exacerbated by these conflicting views on Nature and nature, for they reflect each character’s larger social and existential outlook—elements that eventually inspire the separation of the biological sisters.

This is a much juicier version that is only possible because of the ground covered over the course of the first three pages. From “nature” “pointing to a weakness” Lexi has morphed into the more complex idea that differing views of Nature/nature *exacerbated* the sisters’ relationship to the point of “separation.” The first thesis is a sort of thesis lite” and this second one is a thesis 2.0. Having both is helpful to the reader in marking how the paper is progressing.

From this restatement, Lexi launches into her first body paragraphs. These paragraphs are a deeper foray into Nature/nature, this time paired with a close reading of two contrasting paragraphs that end with a transition into a next important theme in her paper (history). This section obviously comes after her introduction but was included because it shows how Lexi tied

plot summary into the body paragraphs. Although plot summary is often thought of as “background” information that belongs in the introduction, Lexi shows how there are other ways of going about this—one option is to tie in analysis with plot summary by carefully choosing representative passages to close-read. Again, this is an instance of one move doing double duty: a close reading that facilitates plot summary and analysis.

In many ways, Lexi’s is a classic English paper, but it has much to offer for the nonhumanities and humanities writer alike. The excerpt here is a great example of different lexicon elements fulfilling multiple functions. Establishing key terms may be the perfect way for a certain paper to open up into character analysis; plot summary can be delayed into the first body paragraph and paired with the first close reading. In this introduction, Lexi shows both creativity and confidence.