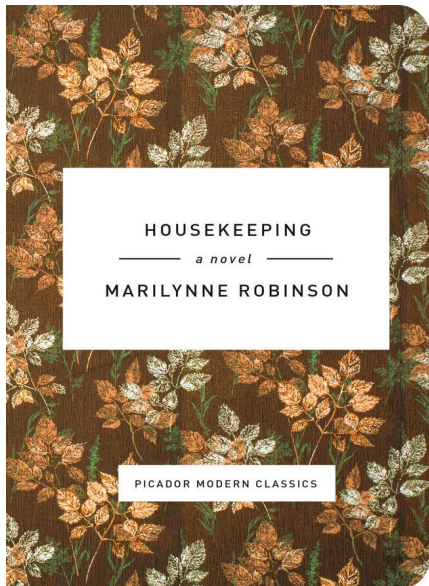


A Few Reviews :



Understanding Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* Through Her *Essays*

Housekeeping is a book one may pick up quite by accident, and after reading a few lines may consider it yet another boring novel. It is, however, like stepping into the ocean with your eyes closed. You feel a thin layer of water barely reaching up to your ankles. Then the waves begin and you realize you are to receive more than you have bargained for. And only after you have read Robinson's *Essays*, you discover the wonders that this ocean holds thousands of feet beneath the surface.

To understand the magnificence of Robinson's writing and truly comprehend the enlightened message she is trying to convey to the reader, I did a study of her life and character and read some of her other writings. However, it was only after reading some material on Transcendentalism as well as her *Essays* titled, "*When I Was a Child I Read Books*" that I began to decipher the complexity of her narrative.

She writes in her *Essays*, "...we sometimes feel adrift from humankind, as if our technology-mediated life on this planet has deprived us of the brilliance of the night sky, the smell and companionship of mules and horses, the plain food and physical peril and weariness that made our grandparents' lives so much more like Jesus..." (*Essays* 127).

Robinson weaves her philosophical belief and ideology into her stories, giving her work a depth that is not easy for the novice writer to imitate. However, the concept of being able to infuse values and ideas into a story is certainly intriguing. She writes in one of the last chapters of *Housekeeping*, “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...” (*Housekeeping* 192).

The author’s honest, sincere and straightforward approach is vivid from the very beginning of her novel with the opening line that states, “My name is Ruth,” a statement that has often been compared to Herman Melville’s “Call me Ishmael” in *Moby-Dick*. There are repeated Biblical references throughout the book; so much so that some believe that the story conveys the message of the Book of Ruth. But Ruth reminds me more of the heroine of Willa Cather’s “My Antonia.” She symbolizes the daring, carefree and adventurous side of America before it succumbed to the norms and confines of civil society. Antonia is barefoot and wild, yet, despite the adversities that she faces, she embraces the wilderness she has stepped into; a wilderness that claimed the life of her father, just as it did Ruth’s grandfather.

I ended up reading some parts of this book over and over again because of the masterful use of the English language in describing even what would constitute insignificant details. Nothing can replace careful utilization of vocabulary in writing and spending time reviewing and rewriting until the work reaches the state of perfection. Robinson’s descriptions are potent and are used with maximum efficiency. So much so

that one can almost smell and taste the water of the lake, a lake that holds within its bosom the essence of the people who were drowned in it.

In the movie titled “The Book Thief,” the main character, Liesel, is told, “If your eyes could speak, what would they say?” Robinson describes the scenes in her novel as if her five senses were literally speaking, “When the sun rose, clouds soaked up the light like a stain. It became colder. The sun rose higher, and the sky grew bright as tin. The surface of the lake was very still. As the boys’ feet struck the water, there was a slight sound of rupture” (*Housekeeping* 7).

Take this line, for example, about how the lake water will flood a cellar, “One will open a cellar door to wading boots floating tallowy soles up and planks and buckets bumping at the threshold, the stairway gone from sight after the second step” (*Housekeeping* 5).

According to a quotation posted on *Cecile’s Writers* website, “Every ingredient in a dish is similar to every word in a story. Having the right ingredients and a good recipe, though, does not guarantee success; you have to add some part of yourself to get it right.” Getting it right is what Marilynne Robinson achieves in this bewitching novel because there is a part of her in the story. She writes in her Essays, “I remember when I was a child ... kneeling by a creek that spilled and pooled among rocks and fallen trees with the unspeakably tender growth of small trees already sprouting from their backs, and thinking, there is only one thing wrong here, which is my own presence, and that is the slightest imaginable intrusion—feeling that my solitude, my loneliness, made me almost acceptable in so sacred a place” (*Essays* 88).

Novelists have to share experiences that have deeply touched them in order to have an impact on the reader. Robinson shares her experience of loneliness by “stealing” this real concept and weaving it into her novel. In Robinson’s words, “only lonesomeness allows one to experience this sort of radical singularity, one’s greatest dignity and privilege. Understanding this permits one to understand the sacred poetry in strangeness, silence, and otherness” (*Essays* 90).

Robinson celebrates solitude. If *Housekeeping* had a soul, one word to describe it would have been solitude. The “*perfect quiet*” Robinson refers to on page 15 of her novel, describes the solitude and loneliness of the three daughters of Sylvia Foster, who in their tumultuous teenage years have virtually no conversations with their mother or among themselves. The family has always avoided socializing with the locals. After all, it was the topography of the land that brought them there in the first place, not the presence of its inhabitants.

Grandma Sylvia is a meticulous housekeeper, but she is “lulled” by the serenity and order of the household “into forgetting what she should never have forgotten.” (*Housekeeping* 13) “This perfect quite had settled into their house after the death of their father. That event had troubled the very medium of their lives. Time and air and sunlight bore wave and wave of shock, until all the shock was spent...” (*Housekeeping* 15).

Thus, Robinson establishes causality and shows why they grow up to lead such unusual lives. The eldest seeks refuge in religion and leaves for China. The last, Sylvie, becomes a transient and a drifter. Yet, in that very transience, and in her loneliness, she finds a treasure that she ultimately shares with Ruth. Loneliness surrounds Ruth’s life

and she finds solace in it, “because, once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise. Loneliness is an absolute discovery,” Robinson writes.

A writer does not have to literally mention the date or the era of a novel. Clues are provided throughout Robinson’s novel that point to the period when the story took place; clues such as the fact that television was not widely available as a means of entertainment (TV was introduced to American households in 1928). Subtle references point to the era of women’s suffrage movement in the late 19th or early 20th century.

I did not see feminist references in any of Robinson’s essays, however, Karen Kaivola writes in her analysis of Robinson’s *Housekeeping* that it “has been used and used well—by recent feminist critics.... Told from Ruth’s perspective, the novel is for many readers most sympathetic with Ruth—and by extension, with Sylvie and with female resistance to an oppressive, normative, and normalizing conventionality. But *Housekeeping* itself is not univocally or unproblematically feminist” (Kaivola, “The Pleasures and Perils of Merging: Female Subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*”).

In her *Essays*, Robinson writes, “I tell my students, language is music. Written words are musical notation. The music of a piece of fiction establishes the way in which it is to be read, and, in the largest sense, what it means. It is essential to remember that characters have a music as well, a pitch and tempo, just as real people do. To make them believable, you must always be aware of what they would or would not say, where stresses would or would not fall” (*Essays* 130).

Robinson’s characters are not rigid, but flexible and malleable like real people. This I found to be one of her most impressive techniques. They are at times indecisive

and at times suddenly portrayed as resolute. Like the grandfather “one Spring” quitting “his subterraneous house” to walk “to the railroad” and take “a train west” (*Housekeeping* 4). Lucille at one point decides to lead a separate path from her sister when earlier she appears irresolute. The same is true for Ruth who is generally hesitant and unsure of herself, but in refusing to accompany the Sheriff and leaving Sylvie, she displays an extraordinary amount of steadfastness and resolve.

Issues are stated so matter-of-factly by the narrator of *Housekeeping*, as if she is a reporter who is objectively describing a scene where an event has taken place. Yet we know that Ruth could not have been there when her grandfather drowned or when the lake claimed her mother. Also, for a drifter she seems extraordinarily articulate.

There are moments in the book when it appears that Ruth cannot distinguish between what is real and what is imagined. At times, Ruth’s imagination becomes her reality. Sylvie could be the mother she has lost. She even calls her Helen at one point as they drift aimlessly in the middle of the night in their stolen boat on the very lake where her mother and grandfather drowned. It seems as if Ruth reconstructs the past based on the information she gathers from the locals or the material she reads in old newspapers. There are moments, however, as in page 17 that she starts by assuming her grandmother was carrying out a task, but goes on to disclose her most private thoughts that only the old woman would have known. This technique certainly adds to the complexity of the narrative, although I am not sure how easy it would be to imitate.

Robinson painstakingly describes her characters with meticulous care to make them not only believable but unforgettable. Even minor and inconsequential characters are described in detail, like the reference to “a conductor of more than extraordinary

influence” (*Housekeeping* 5) or an emphasis on “a porter and a waiter,” who had survived the derailment and the subsequent submersion of the train, being “distantly related” (*Housekeeping* 6). Such details may seem unnecessary to the apprentice writer, but providing such details is precisely what gives Robinson’s novel the caliber of a classic masterpiece. Even dogs are real characters in the story with descriptions such as “They were young, leggy dogs, affable and proprietary...” making “a gallant and youthful joke of their own strength and speed, and flaunted an utter indifference to the safety of their limbs” (*Housekeeping* 33).

The narrative slows down and speeds up at intervals. This is particularly true in the first two pages of the book where initially a whole lot of information is provided and then the story stays focused for quite a while on the grandfather’s painting.

Moments of dramatic exposition occur in places such as pages 158 and 159 of the novel where the reader begins to understand the plot with greater clarity. Here Ruth states, “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 full of almanacs and Kipling and Defoe. For all the appearance these things gave of substance and solidity, they might better be considered a dangerous weight on a frail structure.”

Concise paragraphs describe, sometimes with a touch of humor, what would take a chapter to convey. One example that comes to mind is this sentence on page 32 that states, “Lily and Nona, I think, enjoyed nothing except habit and familiarity, the precise replication of one day in the next....This was not to be achieved in Fingerbone,...where Lucille and I perpetually threatened to cough or outgrow our shoes” (*Housekeeping* 32).

Albeit, there are elements in this novel that are left to the imagination of the reader, like the fact that maybe Grandpa Edmund Foster's love of travel journals led to Aunt Sylvie's extraordinary interest in travel. Of course, providing clues to events, without outwardly expressing in detail their root causes, is one way to engage the intelligent reader.

Ruth and her sister keep going to the lake, the same lake that according to one of the Fingerbone widows, carried "the smell, the taste and the sight of" those who had drowned in it. While knowing "the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below," they still reach out to it like a long, lost relative (*Housekeeping* 9). In her Essays, too, Robinson alludes to "All the beautiful children of earth lying down in a final darkness," and adds, "but no, there is that wondrous love to assure us that the world is more precious than we can possibly imagine" (*Essays* 140).

In his book titled "The Art of Fiction," David Lodge states that "Lexical and grammatical repetition" is probably rejected in classrooms and one's syntax is expected to contain variations (*The Art of Fiction* 90). Lodge continues to state that some modern writers reject this notion and use repetitive words in their paragraphs for emphasis.

There is an epiphanic revelation in this paragraph of Robinson's *Housekeeping* where the word woman is used repeatedly and very touchingly to describe the feelings of young Ruthie: "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" (*Housekeeping* 132).

Repeated references to the cold temperatures and to darkness, particularly the statement on page 116, "darkness is the only solvent" sets the mood of this thought-

provoking novel. This is an effective method that is similar to the work of an artist choosing particular paint colors to make the work more authentic. A “spectacular derailment” (*Housekeeping* 5) ends the life of the grandfather and almost all the passengers on a train that is “black” in a “moonless night” (*Housekeeping* 6). There is also darkness that is “impenetrable to any eye” in waters that are “perilously cold” and Ruth’s mother disappears “into the blackest depth of the lake” (*Housekeeping* 22).

Sylvie seems obsessed with the cold, black lake that took her father’s life. There is a chill one feels in their bones when reading the book. There is no real warmth, no real love, except occasionally in the form of a warm blanket. Cold hands are also a constant theme, as are cold feet and boots filled with freezing water. However, I found the most striking reference to darkness to be this statement, “and as we glided across the ice toward Fingerbone, we would become aware of the darkness, too close to us, like a presence in a dream....If every house in Fingerbone were to fall before our eyes, snuffing every light, the event would touch our senses as softly as a shifting among embers, and then the bitter darkness would step nearer” (*Housekeeping* 35).

It gets to a point where Ruth cannot separate the darkness in her mind from the external darkness around her. She states, “I simply let the darkness in the sky become coexistent with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones.... While it was dark...it seemed to me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be perfect and permanent” (*Housekeeping* 116). For Ruth the loss of all “memory, thought,” etc. is a relief. By embracing the darkness of the night, the darkness of the lake and the dark future that is before her, as she follows Sylvie down the bridge to nowhere, leaving behind a burning

house, Ruth hopes to find closure, an end to the suffering that has lasted through three generations.

In her other novel titled *Gilead*, Robinson writes, “Now that I look back, it seems to me that in all that deep darkness a miracle was preparing. So I am right to remember it as a blessed time, and myself as waiting in confidence, even if I had no idea what I was waiting for.” (*Gilead* 64)

I must add, however, that all this is just the surface of the ocean. You only get to feel the depth of the novel when you read quotations like this from Walt Whitman in Robinson’s *Essays*. “There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that rises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal....In such devout hours, in the midst of significant wonders of heaven and earth, creeds, conventions fall away and become of no account before this simple idea” (qtd. in *Essays* xii-xiii).

Robinson goes on to state, “identity seems now to imply membership in a group, through ethnicity or affinity or religion or otherwise. Rather than acknowledging the miraculous privilege of existence as a conscious being...” (*Essays* xiii).

These moments of “consciousness” are brought to the attention of the reader in references such as the time when the grandmother wants to “see” the seahorses, even when she is staring at them (*Housekeeping* 12) or when she places “her hand under a potato plant” and sees “the earth, the sky and the garden, not as they always are,” proclaiming, “What have I seen, what have I seen” (*Housekeeping* 19).

In describing the writings of the 19th century where Robinson places much focus and emphasis, she states in her *Essays*, “Writers of that period assumed that human nature was deformed... So it is not surprising that their heroes lived outside society, and neither

did nor suffered the grueling injuries that were the stuff of ordinary life. In Whitman the outsider is a visionary. In Thoreau he is a critic. In the vernacular tradition of Western myth he is a rescuer and avenger. In every version he expresses discontent with society” (*Essays* 91).

It appears that Ruth is just such a character. She lives outside of social norms and neither attempts, nor is inclined to conform. She is not a “*visionary*” or a “*critic*,” but rather allows herself to be moved by the powerful forces of nature in a direction that is different from the standards dictated by society. Ruth exemplifies that aspect of humanity that defies convention.

The enormity of religious references in Robinsons *Essays* point to her scholarly command of religious texts and even comparative religious discourse and is indicative of adherence to philosophic principles capable of challenging certain ideas in Christian thought. In her essay titled, “The Fate of Ideas: Moses,” she refers to “the uneasy relation of the Old to the New Testaments,” negating the idea that the teachings of the Old Testament are no longer valid (*Essays* 96).

However, the more I read about Robinson, the more I am convinced that the fundamental message of her writings is based on Transcendentalism more than any other idea. Transcendentalism, according to one definition, is “the view that the basic truths of the universe lie beyond the knowledge we obtain from our senses, reason, logic, or laws of science. We learn these truths through our intuition, our Divine Intellect.” In this view, “Society is the source of corruptive, distracting materialism,” and “Nature is inherently good because it is symbolic of the spirit (God)” (*Transcendentalism: Random Notes and Important Definitions*).

In her dreams, Ruth tries to make sense out of the horrors that have shaped her life as she reflects, “I dreamed that I was walking across the ice on the lake, which was breaking up as it does in the spring, softening and shifting and pulling itself apart. But in the dream the surface that I walked on proved to be knit up of hands and arms and upturned faces that shifted and quickened as I stepped, sinking only for a moment into lower relief under my weight” (*Housekeeping* 41).

In fact, Ruth drifts so far away from the physical world that she appears to feel neither hunger nor cold, saying, “It seemed to me that I made no impact on the world, and that in exchange I was privileged to watch it unawares” (*Housekeeping* 106). It is no wonder that the inadequacies of her life “the clutter of ordinary life on the deck of a drowned ship” (*Housekeeping* 102) do not trouble her.

And here we get to the treasures at the bottom of the ocean as we watch Ruth transcend above and beyond human needs. Thinking back about the moment she was hiding in the orchard Ruth says, “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 felt giddily free and eager, as you do in dreams, when you suddenly find that you can fly, very easily, and wonder why you have never tried it before. I might have discovered other things. For example, I was hungry enough to begin to learn that hunger has its pleasures, and I was happily at ease in the dark, and in general, I could feel that I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one” (*Housekeeping* 204).

According to Robinson, “To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to

taste it . . . and when do our senses know anything so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole" (*Housekeeping* 152).