In Marilynn Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, transfiguration refers to a change of form from someone who is dead into a different, better, and living person. This type of transfiguration differs from the biblical definition, where transfiguration is a change in a living person into a more divine personal state. For example, it occurs when the living Jesus changes into a more glorious Jesus. However, the dead Helen transforms into a glorified Sylvie. Despite these differences, both biblical and *Housekeeping* transfigurations are similar in that they are physical changes, not just imagined transformations. By exploring how Helen’s death causes both transfiguration and abandonment, the transfiguration is physical, and Sylvie is a glorified being, we find that Helen transfigures to reverse her abandonment of Ruthie. This “unabandonment” provides Ruthie with a sense of both belonging and identity, things she loses when Helen dies.

Helen’s death initiates an identity crisis in Ruthie, a crisis that forces Ruthie to always long for Helen. Helen perhaps does not deserve this attention. For example, Ruthie remembers, “*my* mother….tended us with a gentle indifference…she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned” (Robinson 109). Even beyond the indifference, Ruthie knows that she has suffered deeply as a victim of the heinous crime of abandonment. When children like Ruthie are abandoned, they no longer belong to the primary social unit, the family, and they feel they do not belong anywhere. Belonging is essential to identity because it allows people to recognize themselves as part of a group and feel connection to their community. Therefore, when Helen commits suicide, Ruthie does not feel like she belongs to anyone, especially not to an adult who can love and raise her. Thus, Ruthie does not have an identity. She instead becomes a “zombie” (127) who wanders around and searches for “something [she] had lost” (124). This something is her identity and sense of belonging. Ruthie starts longing for Helen because Ruthie feels that she
can only belong again through her mother. With this longing, Helen becomes “a music [Ruthie] no longer heard, that rang in [her] mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished” (160). Helen plagues Ruthie’s mind like music people cannot get out of their heads. This music often only leaves when the need to listen to that music is satisfied. Likewise, Ruthie’s longing for Helen will only stop once Ruthie belongs and has identity.

Helen’s suicide induces this eternal longing because it not only destroys Ruthie’s sense of belonging, but it also causes Ruthie to lose Helen. This loss makes Helen exponentially important, similar to how “[Ruthie] would become extraordinary” only if Sylvie lost Ruthie to the authorities (195). For example if Helen had not died, her children would have “telephoned her out of guilt and nostalgia” or “forgotten her birthday,” and they would have “left her finally” (197). They would be as indifferent to her as she had been to them. Moreover, if Helen had come back, her children “would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow” (198). However, Ruthie is not indifferent to Helen, and she does know the extent of Helen’s sorrow because she often ponders on Helen’s life and death in her search for belonging. Therefore, Helen becomes more extraordinary to Ruthie because Helen dies and breaks the family.

Helen’s death might have broken the family, but similar to how God’s gift of a Savior allows humankind to repent and be saved, transfiguration provides a way for Helen to be cleansed of her sins and for the abandonment to be reversed. However, only death allows this sacred transfiguration to occur. For instance, Ruthie remembers Helen’s extreme calm before the suicide: “in all this there was the hush and solemnity of incipient transfiguration” (196). If her before-death tranquility indicates Helen’s initial transfiguring, then most of the transfiguration must occur after her death. Furthermore, since transfiguration makes one into a more glorious person, Helen’s death and subsequent transfiguration would allow her to become a more loving and more selfless person. However if Helen had not died, “She would have remained
untransfigured” (198). An untransfigured Helen would not love her children nor would she want them. She would have remained indifferent. Thus, Helen’s suicide is not wholly horrible even though it breeds confusion in Ruthie. The transfiguration allows Ruthie to gain back her identity and not feel abandoned anymore. It also redeems Helen by changing her into a better mother.

This transfiguration is also a physical occurrence, meaning that Helen’s redemption is based on more than Ruthie’s thoughts. Because abandoned children often experience mental illness, the transfiguration might have been in Ruthie’s head. However, the specific, physical occurrences of cats, hair, music, and birth imagery prove that the transfiguration must be truly physical rather than delusions of a mental illness. For instance when asked about Helen, Sylvie replies “‘I’ve never known anyone so fond of cats. She was always bringing them home’” (51). By the end of the book, thirteen to fourteen cats inhabited the house (181). Sylvie, who never expresses love for cats and even throws rocks at domestic animals, clearly undergoes a transfiguration to become more like Helen when she brings cats into the home. This physical manifestation also demonstrates how Helen is redeemed by the transfiguration. The original cat the Sylvie brings is a mother of two litters. The mother never leaves her children, even though they probably grow up. Because Sylvie brings the mother cat to Ruthie’s home, she introduces a devoted mother to the house, one who will never leave and one who is better than Helen.

Helen’s transfiguration also introduces other feminine concepts beyond motherhood, such as hair brushing. One night, Sylvie brushes and puts up her hair in different styles just like Helen does the night before she dies (131). Ruthie explains that both Helen and Sylvie are thinking “the same thoughts before their mirrors” (131). Since Sylvie generally does not care about her appearance, the fact that she carefully brushes her hair is an odd departure from her usual habits. This hair brushing is therefore a sign of Helen’s transfiguration because Sylvie mimics Helen by brushing her hair the same way that Helen does at the onset of her transfiguration. The physical
transfiguration through hair also indicates a mother and daughter bond. A mother traditionally helps her daughter with her hair with the act of hair brushing, a near ritual that bonds the two together and allows the daughter to integrate into the feminine community. Likewise since she desperately wants to belong to a family, Ruthie would want someone who could help her with her hair, so that a mother and daughter bond develops. Ruthie says, “I imagined myself feigning sleep while Sylvie brushed my short brown hair into long golden ringlets” (68). Ruthie thus wants Sylvie to connect with her as a woman so that she can belong and turn something lacking in femininity—her hair—into something more femininely beautiful. Likewise, Helen becomes more redeemed when Sylvie can shape and transfigure her like curled ringlets.

Helen’s quest to unabandon Ruthie and become redeemed through transfiguration is also demonstrated through music. Sylvie hums and sings Helen’s favorite song, “Good Bye, Irene” (165, 196) as a sign that she and Helen are becoming one. This transfiguration show in music is also a disguised explanation from Helen to Ruthie. In the lyrics of the early 1900s song by Huddie Ledbetter, the narrator mentions that he sometimes “take[s] a great notion to jump in the river and drown” (Ledbetter). The lyrics also mention that he also greatly loves Irene despite these inclinations. Thus, by having Sylvie sing that song as a transfigured Helen, Ruthie can see why Helen drowned even though she loved Ruthie. Ruthie can feel less abandoned and more loved when her mother gives her closure through transfiguring into Sylvie. Furthermore, at one point, Ruthie and Sylvie dance to “some slow song [Sylvie] did not sing” (160) that mimics her mother’s corpse that “swayed continuously… a slow dance, a sad and heady dance” at the bottom of the lake (213). Since dancing is a connection between two people, Sylvie, as a transfigured Helen, can connect Helen to Ruthie through this eerie dance.

Notwithstanding cats, hair, and music, the most direct physical manifestation of Helen’s transfiguration to Sylvie comes through birthing imagery. Sylvie, now Helen, must take Ruthie
as her daughter and thus must birth her. To represent rebirth, Ruthie crawls and sits between Sylvie’s legs several times on top of womb-like water. Ruthie even remarks that Sylvie “could as well be my mother. I…slept in her very shape like an unborn child” (145). In fact, sitting and sleeping in Sylvie’s shape is the final act of transfiguration, the rebirth. The transfiguration is finally completed when Ruthie calls Sylvie by her transfigured name, Helen (167). Right after Ruthie says “Helen,” a train passes. Trains are symbols of change, and this train passing indicates that the final change from Helen to Sylvie has occurred. Ruthie’s rebirth finally lets Ruthie find identity and belonging because she is reborn into a whole family unit. She belongs to Sylvie, and Sylvie and Ruthie likely never separate from that point forward. Sylvie is a glorified Helen because Sylvie keeps the family unit of two together into adulthood. Helen and Sylvie’s mother could not keep her daughters at home, but as a transfigured person, Sylvie is endowed with the power to keep the family together and give Ruthie identity and belonging.

Sylvie is a more glorified version of Helen simply because she does not abandon Ruthie. Sylvie firmly believes that “‘families should stay together’” (186) unlike Helen who broke the family, and, true to that statement, she never permanently leaves Ruthie. Sylvie however differs in her glory from Jesus Christ. Christ’s transfiguration is characterized by an increase in light. Sylvie’s final transfiguration occurs in the dark (161). This dark transfiguration demonstrates a fully human transfiguration. While Christ and his disciples rise in their glory and knowledge, Sylvie grows simply by gaining a child and simply not leaving her. Likewise, Helen is redeemed purely because she can give Ruthie identity through the transfigured Sylvie.

Through transfiguration, Robinson clearly demonstrates that an abandoned child can regain identity and belonging and that a subpar mother can be forgiven. Transfiguration needs death, physical manifestations, and a human glorification of the transfigured person for it to occur. Transfiguration is the means by which Ruthie and Helen are redeemed because
transfiguration is closely related to grace. Grace is God’s mercy in which sins are freely forgiven, regardless of merit, and people are granted salvation. Likewise, transfiguration freely changes people regardless of merit. For example, neither Ruthie nor Helen does any work that makes them deserve an identity or forgiveness. Ruthie simply wanders around looking for what is missing and Helen even sins through suicide. However, through a freely given transfiguration, both become better. Both are granted salvation in their own desires. Ruthie remembers Helen. Helen unabandons Ruthie. Perhaps, the spiritual gift of transfiguration allows this mother and daughter to belong to each other even more through a great transfigurative connection to God.
Works Cited
