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Redefining Self in the Midst of “Things”: Marilynne Robinson’s
Housekeeping

Kristin Lowe

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Redefining Self in the Midst of “Things”: Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*

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In this essay, I examine the role of material culture in Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping* (1980) to understand how the prominent presence of material culture introduces complex questions about the relationships among objects, reality, and the self. By recognizing objects’ fluidity of meaning, *Housekeeping* offers its characters a way to see their individuality and conceptions of reality in a similar state of flux. Significantly, it is in the act of recognizing that the socially accepted uses of objects are not necessarily “natural” parts of existence, and, like elements of the natural world, the meanings and uses of these items are susceptible to change and decay that an individual is able to recognize that the self is similarly fluid and moldable, which creates room for both imagination and for the possibility of change.

Keywords: *Housekeeping*, Marilynne Robinson, material culture, objects, nature, deconstruction

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Introduction

In Marilynne Robinson's essay "Facing Reality" from *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998), she suggests that "somehow we feel increasingly sunk in a world of mere things, in a hard-edged reality that disallows imagination except to exact tribute from it, in portraits which assert its own power and ferocity, or in interludes and recreations which concede by their triviality that only Reality matters" (76-77). Here Robinson contends that being submerged in the material world produces mundane interactions with "things," or objects of daily life. These interactions begin to feel like the only layer of reality in which lived experience can be understood and interpreted. Nevertheless, as Robinson suggests, relying solely on objects to define and understand reality ignores elements of life like the imagination that cannot be measured or represented in concrete objects. Significantly, when individuals become so used to surrounding themselves with objects and understanding their reality based on their interactions with such, they perceive the meanings these items hold as natural rather than artificial and constructed. In so thinking, individuals accept a static and exclusive reality, which eliminates room for imagination that leads to progress and change except for brief moments when imagination merely reaffirms the "hard-edged" reality that is created by interacting with objects of the material world. Becoming lost in a static and monotonous world of objects excludes room for imagination, or removes the ability to conceive of images and concepts that are not based on interactions with the material world, which simultaneously restricts an individual's understanding of reality and flattens one's conception of "self" because they are grounded in a reality weighted with concreteness.

Robinson's "Facing Reality" revisits philosophically-key issues she previously explored fictionally in her novel *Housekeeping* (1980). The interactions *Housekeeping's* characters have

with the objects that surround them introduce complex questions about the relationships among objects, reality, and the self. Within the text, man-made items of material culture are deconstructed as they break or are used in unconventional ways, thus undoing assumptions about traditional uses in order to reveal convention where we assume nature to be. In so doing, *Housekeeping* attempts to make both characters and readers aware that the traditional or “normal” use of items like a broom, a book, a train, or even a house is a construction rather than a natural occurrence, thus provoking her characters to perceive of reality beyond the conventions of the material world. This recognition invites readers to similarly question the singularity of a “hard-edged reality” produced by constant interaction with the material world. In *Housekeeping*, objects are often deconstructed as they come in contact with the natural world, or, in other words, with elements of the world that exist in nature independent of human creation. Robinson blurs these lines in order to show characters and readers that distinctions between the man-made world and natural world are themselves a man-made construct. The text’s exaggerated collapse of these boundaries through the flood and Sylvie’s housekeeping, indicates that characters and readers accept such as part of a “hard-edged reality” and need to be prompted to see beyond these artificial bounds to embrace a reality that recognizes a fluid relationship between the natural world and the man-made world, allowing for the “hard edge” of reality to break down, becoming malleable and able to incorporate imagination.

Reading *Housekeeping* in terms of material culture engages the many scholars who have advanced a variety of approaches to the novel from vagrancy and mysticism to trauma and ecocriticism, enabling a variety of meanings to emerge from the text and individual characters.¹ The most common critical approach to *Housekeeping* has been a feminist one that explores a variety of issues, including the role of women in Western American history, mother-daughter

relationships, the feminine within transience, and most prominently, female relationships to the domestic sphere and traditional modes of domesticity.² However, this type of feminist approach has limits, for viewing all characters and actions in the novel with a feminist lens can flatten female characters and trap them in a new binary, one confined to either supporting or rejecting traditional domesticity. Since the text tries to free its characters from these very male/female binaries, it would seem unwise to fall into such a trap, just as it would be wrong to limit one's understanding of reality by becoming "sunk in a world of mere things." A feminist reading of *Housekeeping* especially overlooks the ways that characters' interactions with objects of material culture complicate a static construction of not only femininity, but also meaning and understandings of "self." Examining how each character interacts with objects of the material world reveals that the characters' identity is contingent on this interaction, which challenges traditional categories of identity, allowing characters to change and develop as their interactions with and understanding of objects change, thereby resisting one-sided readings of characters. Further, a focus on material culture opens up meanings within the text that extend beyond gender issues to broadly applicable issues of self and reality.

Recognizing objects' fluidity of meaning, *Housekeeping* offers its characters a way to see individuality and self-definition in a similar state of flux. As the characters interact with objects around them and as these items are deconstructed throughout the text, they become conscious of an altered "self" emerging. Significantly, it is in the act of recognizing that the socially accepted uses of objects are not necessarily "natural" parts of existence, and, like elements of the natural world, the meanings and uses of these items are susceptible to change and decay that an individual is able to recognize that the self is similarly fluid and moldable, which creates room for both imagination and for the possibility of change.

Material Culture and Thing Theory

Material culture is the relationship or exchange between societies and the objects that they create. While most literary characters interact with objects, *Housekeeping* uniquely draws our attention to material culture and this interaction by making objects an integral part of the story as they break, decay, or are used in unconventional ways, rather than forgettable items used by characters to accomplish mundane tasks or to construct a setting. These items of material culture are objects that “we buy or are given” (Berger 16), or more broadly, that are the “tangible yield of human labor” (Glassie 41), created by and for humans’ use within society like trains, clothing, houses, kitchen utensils, and furniture in *Housekeeping*. Significantly, material culture extends beyond objects created consciously by humans to include any human exchange with the natural world like “tracks in the mud” or shoveling snow (Glassie 41). Once an object is created by human labor or action, it comes to hold meaning based on how it is repeatedly used and how people interact with it in different contexts. Indeed, objects always “exist in context,” and as folklorist Henry Glassie contends, meaning is created as “the sum of relations between objects and people” (59). Thus, social norms and expectations contribute to the meanings rendered through this interaction. For example, in the context of American society, a broom represents more than just an object with bristles used to sweep a surface—it represents a “correct,” or seemingly “natural” way to keep a house tidy according to American social values. Humans become used to the meanings and functions of objects to the point that objects become a natural fixture in life, or like a broom, inherently correct, ordinary, or “normal.” The social construction that is naturalization therefore differs from the term “natural world,” which refers to elements of the world that exist independent of human interaction like trees, rivers, and mountains.

When objects break or become functionless as they come into contact with the natural world, like the furniture that becomes waterlogged and unusable as a result of the flood in *Housekeeping*, once seemingly natural meanings of the objects are “denaturalized” causing a reevaluation of their meanings. This process is another form of deconstruction, a critical approach made popular by Jacques Derrida. While Derrida never clearly outlines this process (to define deconstruction would be to freeze its meaning in time), examining his work suggests how a process like deconstruction functions within a text. For example, in “Restitutions: The Truth in Painting,” Derrida denaturalizes a pair of shoes in a Van Gogh painting that both Heidegger and Shapiro have assumed to be a *pair* of shoes to which they have assigned an owner: to Derrida it is a pair of peasant shoes and to Shapiro the shoes clearly belong to a city dweller. Derrida illustrates deconstruction in this text as he questions both Heidegger’s and Shapiro’s assumptions about the shoes’ owner, and makes the function and purpose of the shoes seem contrived rather than natural. He clearly states this idea saying, “Let us then consider the shoes as an institute, a monument. There is nothing natural in this product” (261). Derrida further removes the shoes from a traditional understanding of a pair of shoes used to protect feet from contact with the ground by emphasizing how odd the shoes in the painting become when they are not used for this seemingly natural purpose: “Their detachment is obvious. Unlaced, abandoned, detached from the subject (wearer, holder or owner, or even author-signatory) and detached/untied in themselves (the laces are untied)” (261). Because the shoes are “detached” from their normal use or context, their once “natural” purpose is less inherently obvious or correct. Derrida further denaturalizes the “pair of shoes” by questioning why Shapiro and Heidegger assume that it is in fact a *pair* of shoes (“What makes him so sure that they are a *pair of shoes*?”), and then questions “What is a pair?” (259).

In the end of Derrida's discussion of the peasant's shoes, there are no definite conclusions—to Derrida, the shoes are still ownerless and now seem foreign and “detached” from normal consumption just as the idea of “pair” has begun to feel odd. Much of Derrida's work focuses on deconstructing texts, and, similar to his discussion of the peasant's shoes, does not come to conclusions about meaning or the definition of deconstruction because, to Derrida, everything is artificial and constructed, and revealing such allows one to examine the values that drive the construct. Deconstruction, in short, is an ethical mode of interpretation that works to denaturalize and undo assumptions concerning what is perceived to be nature in order to reveal artifice and convention where we assume nature to be, thereby exposing the skeletal structure of meaning, allowing new meanings or solutions to be imagined or understood.

Bill Brown's article “Thing Theory” (1991) further articulates a relationship between deconstruction and objects, therein offering a more precise way to understand the process of revealing artifice within objects of material culture, making it possible to understand the cultural values that shape this conception. Brown makes a distinction between “objects” and “things,” stating that an object is what surrounds us and “we look *through* objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about us),” and further states that “we look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts” (4). In this formulation, an object acts as a social lens through which we can begin to understand society and ourselves. Objects do not have inherent meaning, rather meanings of objects are contingent and contextual: we use objects in certain ways ascribing meaning based on our use and social conventions. By impartially considering the meanings objects have, these

meanings can reveal information about the context and individuals that gave these items value in the first place.

Brown contrasts this conception of objects to “things,” arguing that a thing is an object that has lost its function. Brown contends,

A *thing*, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. (4)

Things are objects that break or momentarily lose their function and thus no longer hold meanings and can no longer act as a social lens. An object embodies cultural meanings and becomes a natural means of completing a task—for example, a pair of shoes is used to protect feet while walking and participating in daily activities. However, when an object’s thingness is revealed through deconstruction, what once was assumed to be natural meaning, purpose, or use of an object becomes, in fact, unnatural. The thingness of an object is often revealed when it is broken because the user is then forced to recognize that what once felt like a natural object used to protect the feet, for example, is now just two odd-looking items made of cloth and rubber with strings looping through holes.

This project uses the words “object,” “item,” and “belonging,” synonymously to indicate an object of material culture that has been imbued with social meanings and conventions and thus acts as a social lens and the term “thing” to indicate an object, item, or belonging, that has become functionless or broken and therefore no longer acts as a social lens. While Derrida’s approach to deconstructing texts involves intellectual moves and active questioning, recognizing

the same revealed artifice when objects break is a more accessible approach to deconstruction. Everyone is surrounded by objects and when these items break an individual is prompted, even forced, to acknowledge artifice and construction without having to actively question natural meanings and uses, which allows for new and various forms of connection, enabling characters to see new and exciting possibilities for their own reality and individuality.

One fundamental way *Housekeeping* draws attention to material culture is the many instances in which characters define and shape their individuality through their interactions with the objects surrounding them. As Brown indicates, objects do not merely exist around individuals, but contribute to how individuals conceptualize “self.” Henry Glassie further illuminates the connection between objects and self, arguing that in some contexts when we look at objects “we find the reflections of our own tired faces” (59). Objects do not wholly define self, but offer small pieces of information about an individual. So, it follows that if objects act as one reference point for understanding self, then as characters in *Housekeeping* reach a new understanding of an object when the thingly nature of an object is revealed, it follows that the object “mirrors” back something new about the self, and allows the individual to see that they are a changing individual, creating room for individuals to imagine a new self.

Examining how characters in *Housekeeping* define and change their “self” in relation to their perceptions of and interactions with objects engages in conversation with phenomenological studies of self—studies concerned with how events and perceptions that occur external to human consciousness reveal something about the individual. Broadly, phenomenology is “the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (Sokolowski 2), and further, “phenomenology insists that identity and intelligibility are available in things . . . We can evidence the way things are; when

we do so, we discover objects, but we also discover ourselves, precisely as datives of disclosure, as those to whom things appear” (Sokolowski 4). While, phenomenological studies do not make the same distinction between “objects” and “things” that this project has borrowed from Brown, instead using the terms “objects” and “things” synonymously to indicate elements of the material world, phenomenology usefully suggests that the internal human experience can be accessed by understanding the material world. Phenomenology argues that the “evidence” of “identity and intelligibility” can be understood and accessed by examining the “objects” around us. While many contend that nothing exists outside the mind, phenomenology assumes that it is possible for events and items in the material world to exist independent of human consciousness—examining these external sites offers a small window to begin to understand the internal workings of an individual. External human interaction with material culture reveals something about the “self” and how people define themselves as distinct individuals through difference. To Glassie, the study of material culture “uses objects to approach human thought and action” (41), meaning that objects of the man-made world can act as an external site of analysis in order to understand something about both the human beings who created a specific piece of material culture and about humans who interact with these objects. Different people like different objects, perceive objects in different ways, and use objects differently: these differences are concrete external locations to analyze and to understand how these differences contribute to a “self” that is different from another “self.” *Housekeeping* draws attention to character interactions with objects as they become broken and unstable “things” to explore the role of material culture in constructing, defining, and changing the self.

Housekeeping

Housekeeping is the tale of Ruth and Lucille, two teenage sisters with an irregular upbringing trying to understand themselves and their place within their family and community. They are left in their unconventional Aunt Sylvie's care while living in their mother's childhood hometown of Fingerbone after her suicide and their caretaking grandmother's death. The whole town of Fingerbone floods, leaving houses and contents waterlogged and useless. Aunt Sylvie is unfazed by this convergence of the home and the natural world and actively fosters it through her housekeeping, letting leaves and animals inhabit the Fosters' home. Eventually, Lucille moves in with her home economics teacher, detaching herself from Sylvie's eccentric housekeeping as the authorities threaten to remove Ruth from Sylvie's care. With the threat of community intervention, Ruth and Sylvie attempt to burn their house and all their belongings, and then take a precarious journey across the high and dangerous railroad bridge, leaving behind Fingerbone and Lucille. The interactions these main characters have with material culture and the natural world are key components of how they understand and shape their identities and conceptions of reality, therein prompting an examination of how their conceptions of self and the world around them change in conjunction with changes to the material world.

Fingerbone is built on land that used to be covered by the town's glacial lake, a symbolic site of convergence that frames the rest of the text as the exchange with the natural world becomes part of the world of material culture, and the two worlds collide, overlap, and blur to engage characters in the constant flux of nature and to enable the deconstruction of objects. Placed in such a precarious setting, Fingerbone represents the possibility and inevitability of the town converging with the natural world: "The terrain on which the town itself is built is relatively level, having once belonged to the lake" (4); and each year it is in danger of flooding:

“sometimes in the spring the old lake will return” (5). The houses, commodities, and people in the text are never completely removed from the natural world as the “level” ground Fingerbone is built on “once belonged to the lake” that returns “sometimes in the spring” to flood the town, and in this way *Housekeeping* disassembles artificial lines between the natural world and items of material culture.

The train accident that kills Ruth and Lucille’s grandfather too amplifies this connection. The accident ends with the train falling off the tracks and into the lake, and the train and all the stuff that was not recovered after the crash—chandeliers (169), suitcases (6) and bodies (7)—all become part of the lake. What was once a large steel object that rolled smoothly across tracks from destination to destination, becomes a big hunk of metal that has completely lost its function and sits somewhere at the bottom of the lake. Like Derrida’s peasant shoes, once the train falls off the tracks and into the depths of the lake, it becomes a thing detached from its original purpose. The deconstruction of the train, a man-made item, establishes an important connection between the natural world and the world of material culture, which becomes more explicit as the presence of the natural world enters the world of material culture and plays an active role in disrupting items in the town.

The snow that precedes the flood in Fingerbone early on in *Housekeeping* too functions to muddle the world of man-made items by complicating the seemingly static concept of “house.” Ruth notes that the snow “drifted up our eaves on one side of the house” and “some houses in Fingerbone simply fell from the weight of snow on their roofs” (33). The indifferent weight of the snow on the houses reminds the inhabitants of Fingerbone that their homes are unstable constructions susceptible to change and erosion under the forces of nature rather than infallible and solid buildings that separate and protect the inside of the home and its inhabitants

from the natural world, which is the conception of “home” they grow accustomed to in long stretches of favorable weather where these boundaries are not threatened. For example, the snow on the Fosters’ house acts as “a source of grave and perpetual anxiety” to Ruth and Lucille’s great aunts Lily and Nona who are used to relying on their brick house for comfort and stability (33). As the snow piles up in Fingerbone, the natural world merges with and shakes the seemingly static and stable world of material culture, reminding inhabitants that the natural world is present and constantly changing.

The natural world converging with the man-made world occurs most notably when the town of Fingerbone floods and many objects of the town—from photo albums to entire houses—are waterlogged and rendered useless. As the flood waters cover and rise across Fingerbone, the flux of the natural world draws attention to the similar change and malleability of the entire town. Ruth notes the cycle that nature goes through: “In a month those flowers would bloom. In a month all dormant life and arrested decay would begin again” (16). Just as the flood waters rise and fall across Fingerbone, elements of the natural world are constantly changing as seasons come and go, plants cycle through life, and weather and natural disasters leave their mark. The similar fluidity of the man-made world is emphasized as the flood interacts with the houses and contents of Fingerbone, accelerating change and decay. Thus, from the start of the text, it works to draw attention to the precarious nature of the man-made aspects of Fingerbone, revealing that items like a house, that are supposed to shield humanity from nature, prove to be things, unable to dependably create this separation from nature.

The ways in which numerous items in the Fosters’ house are affected by the flood and become functionless turning into things, signals this instability. The walls, floors and pieces of furniture in the house become completely waterlogged: “glyphs of crimped and plaited light

swung across the walls and the ceiling. The couch and the armchairs were oddly dark. The stuffing in their backs had slid, and the cushions had shallow craters in the middles of them” (63). Additionally, “fungus and mold crept into wedding dresses and photograph albums, so that the leather crumpled in our hands when we lifted the covers” (62). As their belongings are transformed into soggy, moldy things by the flood, the Fosters have to adjust how they use them: they can no longer sit on the “oddly dark,” sopping couch and armchairs, their photo albums are now too moldy to peruse, and as the water covers the main level and begins creeping up the walls, they are forced to live on the second floor of their house (61). These adjustments provoke them to see their belongings as things that are susceptible to decay rather than objects that are permanent fixtures within their house, creating an environment that allows them to see potential for change in everything around them.

Because the flood renders endless objects functionless throughout *Fingerbone*, the text draws attention to the entire town as a site for observing that once-taken-for-granted uses of items are not necessarily a natural or essential part of existence. The whole town is “strangely transformed” (73) and faced with waterlogged things, including sunk-in graves, flattened headstones, and “losses in hooked and braided rugs and needlepoint footstools” (62). The town looks foreign and unnatural, and it even looks like houses have moved: “Lucille said, ‘I don’t think the Simmons’s house is where it used to be’” (65). Entire houses are moved from their foundations, making the traditionally stable and safe construction of the idea of home unstable. The graves, which were once taken for granted as sacred places for burying the dead, are now destroyed. The furniture, curtains and even items with great sentimental value become mere things filling the house. Lastly, as the flood waters subside, all of *Fingerbone* is “left stripped and blackened and warped and awash in mud” (74). With the upheaval of their houses, cemeteries,

and household items, the Fingerbone community has to unite for “the restoration of the town” (74) that is now “stripped,” “blackened,” and “warped.” Because it becomes necessary to rebuild and restore after the devastating flood, the community’s sense of a static world of material culture is likely unsettled.

Significantly, the transformation of Fingerbone enables Lucille to recognize that she is a similarly fluid being and allows her imagination to believe that she can become a new person. Lucille is understandably afraid of being abandoned since her mother and grandmother both die early in her life. She therefore tries to fit within her Aunt Sylvie’s unconventional lifestyle in order to keep Sylvie from also abandoning her and Ruth. Yet, it is in the midst of the flood that Lucille begins to recognize that she is not content living in the unconventional way that her Aunt Sylvie has prescribed for her and Ruth. The Fosters have always been “standoffish” (74), as Ruth describes them, and even when Sylvie was a child she recalls that their family always kept to themselves—knowing who people were in the town, but nothing more (58). While Ruth does not provide an account of Lucille’s interactions at school, at this point in the text it seems that Lucille has adopted this isolated lifestyle, spending all her free time at home or with Ruth watching the clouds from their window (32), skating on the lake after school until nightfall (34-35), or playing in the snow (60-61). Now, Lucille recognizes the insular life that they have been living, and wants to reach out and connect with other people who are experiencing the flood. For example, one evening during the flood Sylvie suggests that they play crazy eights, and Lucille replies “I don’t really want to,” to which Sylvie asks “What do you want to do?” and Lucille says “I want to find some other people” (66). Lucille is no longer content to hole up with the Fosters and desires contact to the outside world. As a result of the flood, Lucille sees room for new connections and sees her own life as a place where adjustments are possible.

Lucille's awareness that there might be alternatives to the Fosters' way of life triggers the ability to verbally express her feelings of discontent. Prior to the flood, while Lucille and Ruth's great-aunts Lily and Nona are living with them in the brief interim between their grandmother's death and Aunt Sylvie's arrival, Ruth recounts that she and Lucille "stayed awake the whole night because Lucille was afraid of her dreams" (32). While the implication is that Lucille is afraid of the disturbing content of the dreams she was having during the night, this too could be read as Lucille being afraid to pursue the dreams that she has for her individual life. It is during the flood that Lucille can openly express her dissatisfaction with Sylvie's way of life for the first time because the flood has shown her that nothing in life is static, including her familial situation. Sylvie, confused at why Lucille would want to leave their house to find other people, says, "But we're fine here . . . we can cook our own food and sleep in our own beds. What could be better?" to which Lucille responds "I'm very tired of it" (66). Lucille is "tired" of Sylvie's insular and self-sufficient way of life, an exhaustion that in the past has led to dream-filled nights of sleep that frighten Lucille. Aside from expressing anger for feeling constantly abandoned (56), this is the first time that Lucille has openly shown dissatisfaction with her situation and a desire to change it. It is the recognition the objects around her can drastically change, break, and take on new meanings that allows Lucille to see her family and her place within her family in a similarly fluid way. While in the past she has seen her family's place within the community and her place within the family as inevitable, she is now capable of detaching herself from the situation in order to acknowledge that the Fosters are different from other families and to assert that she wants something different. Thus, the flood allows Lucille to recognize her own potential for change. While the changes Lucille chooses to make once she has garnered this knowledge are

susceptible to critique, her ability to make individual choices indicates a positive progression in her character's coming of age.

Lucille's interaction with deconstructed objects not only enables her to see the possibility for adjustments within herself and family, but also potential for change in everything around her. As Lucille begins to change, Ruth notes that "if [Lucille] had made the world, every tree would be bent, every stone weathered, every bough stripped by that steady and contrary wind. Lucille saw in everything its potential for invidious change" (93). While the language of this quote reveals much about Ruth's assessment of Lucille's new attitude towards change—to Ruth, Lucille's new approach to life is "invidious," or meant to injure or harm—these images of comprehensive changes that Ruth imagines Lucille would enact if she had control over the natural world, with "every tree," "every stone," and "every bough" modified, suggest that Lucille sees herself as a "contrary wind," capable of changing anything around her. Lucille does not actually have control over the natural world; however, this quote indicates that Ruth has observed a change in how Lucille perceives the world—Lucille now sees within everything its potential for change and adamantly works to change herself to become the person she envisions.

As Lucille crafts a new personality, she recognizes the power that objects have to help her create a new self. As such, objects transform from items used to accomplish necessary tasks, to items that convey information. Lucille sees that material items hold meaning, and thus sees that associating herself with objects that embody specific values—like items of clothing—will help her assert a new personality. Significantly, Lucille first turns to obtaining objects to try to redefine herself: "She wanted worsted mittens, brown oxfords, red rubber boots" (93). Lucille sees these objects not as items to keep her hands warm and feet covered, but as representing a certain type of put-together and practical person; she wants to be this type of person, so she

works to obtain these possessions. As a result, she associates her “self” with the meanings these objects convey in order to present herself as an orderly member of mainstream society. As Lucille looks at herself through these new objects, they mirror back something different about the kind of person that she is.

Some scholars, like Elizabeth Meese and Sonia Gernes, read Lucille’s drive to change as making her into a vain, materialistic, and personality-less person who wants only to fit in at any cost. In many ways, this is a valid argument: Lucille becomes obsessed with conventional social norms and abiding by them. For instance, Lucille’s morning rituals demonstrate her tireless efforts to fit in conventional society and improve herself. Ruth notes,

Every morning in August Lucille in her nightgown touched her toes by our open window, because she had read somewhere that good health is a form of beauty. She brushed her hair a hundred strokes, till it crackled and flew after the brush. She groomed her nails. This was all in preparation for school, since Lucille was determined now to make something of herself. (132)

Lucille laboriously and methodically “grooms” herself, dutifully exercising “every morning,” brushing her hair “till it crackled,” all to conform to traditional standards of health and beauty in order to “make something of herself,” and seems to base much of her understanding of social acceptability on information she has “read somewhere.” Lucille takes on her personality as a creative project to hone and perfect just as she throws herself into understanding social norms like table manners and how to tie a bow (133).

Because of her Benjamin Franklin approach to self-improvement, Lucille either has received a lot of criticism from scholars or has been completely ignored in favor of discussions centered around Ruth and Sylvie; yet, she is a chief character that undergoes interesting and

significant character development. On the one hand, Meese argues that Lucille is a weak character whose “weakness inspires her conformity to conventional gender roles for women” (61). Gernes goes further, characterizing Lucille as a temptress who entices Ruth to leave her life with Sylvie once they have joined forces (161). On the other hand, as Marilyn Chandler notes,

it is Lucille who represents the will to order, socialization and ‘normality.’ She is the one trying to preserve what in ordinary life most of us regard as sane forms of accommodation and maintenance of civilized standards. Yet in the context of the novel, her efforts seem pathetic, slightly small-minded, common. (304)

With Ruth as narrator, the logic of the novel indeed makes Lucille’s actions seem trite, “small-minded, common,” as Chandler suggests. Yet, Lucille’s actions, stripped from the setting of the novel, are the most normal and relatable of any character in the novel, most accurately representing the “civilized” and “ordinary life” in which most readers live. Lucille may be going to extremes to try to fit into Fingerbone society, allowing insignificant actions like “[brushing] her hair a hundred strokes” to control her self-value, but she is also making personal changes that allow her to live a civilized life of her own choosing—a life that most readers of the text have also chosen to live. Whether or not one agrees with the way of life Lucille chooses—especially when compared to the seemingly pure life that Aunt Sylvie leads within the logic of the text—one must admit that Lucille is able to become a distinct individual from her family and make individual choices and changes because she is able to leave the Foster family and craft a new personality. Focusing on Lucille’s relationship to objects allows for a critical distance that causes the accepted logic of the novel set forth by Ruth’s narration to come into question, allowing readers and critics to see Lucille as an individual that is neither better nor worse but different than Ruth and Sylvie.

While Lucille is empowered by the flood to actively change herself, Aunt Sylvie is already adept at recognizing objects' constructed meanings, garnering critical imagination from this recognition, and thereby adapting to changing situations. Ruth notes Sylvie's attitude towards change: "Sylvie, on her side, inhabited a millennial present. To her the deteriorations of things were always a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on" (94). Sylvie accepts change and decay as an inevitable and "surprising" part of life and sees the present as "fresh," constantly holding potential for complete happiness rather than looking forward to a time or major change when a "millennial" existence is possible. By accepting change and recognizing the fluid nature of both the natural world and material objects, Sylvie has the imagination necessary to constantly and happily adapt to the present and to enjoy the present as surprising, fresh, and exciting, rather than as expected, static, and boring. However, paradoxically, this adaptability does not extend to an ability to adapt to a static position in life since Sylvie seems to need a nomadic life, therein revealing one of Sylvie's main flaws—her inability to create lasting ties with a stable community.

Despite this flaw, Sylvie's unique relationship to objects helps enable an attitude of general adaptability. Such is clear when she returns to Fingerbone to care for Lucille and Ruth, for her actions and uses of belongings constantly call into question their "natural" purpose. For example, the light fixtures in the house rarely receive use because Sylvie prefers the dark and even "liked to eat supper in the dark" (86). Similarly, the normal function of magazines and newspapers (to be read and discarded) is ignored as piles and piles of newspapers fill the house (180). Sylvie casually lets burnt curtains sit unfixd and charred (101). She eats "with her fingers" (87); she never answers the phone (77); she keeps "her clothes and even hairbrush and toothpowder in a cardboard box under the bed" instead of using drawers or storage in the

bathroom; “she [sleeps] on top of the covers, with a quilt over her” (103), and even once abandoned her bed altogether and slept on the lawn (103). While the town has adopted natural uses for items—turning lights on when meals are eaten, answering phones, and storing possessions in specific places—Sylvie disregards these social norms and turns objects into things, using them in any manner she feels like, enabling innovation and exploration of new relationships to these items, ultimately leading to an adaptable attitude that fosters fluid self-definition.

Sylvie’s non-traditional interactions are deliberate, as it is clear from her childhood that she knows social norms; thus, her behavior is based on personal choice. The text reveals little of Sylvie’s childhood, but from what Ruth pieces together we do know that Sylvie was much like her sisters and seemed to accept traditional values of objects and domestic life: she let her sisters brush her long hair (11), she “crossed her legs at the ankles and read magazines” (11), she “took her coffee with two lumps of sugar” (15), and participated in the Fosters’ domestic routine, peeling the vegetables and bringing in bouquets of flowers (15). While it has been made clear that Sylvie adhered to traditional social norms in childhood, one could argue that she has lost a sense for these norms through her life of transience, and therefore, is an ignorant housekeeper rather than a consciously unconventional housekeeper. However, when Sylvie returns to Fingerbone, she is still aware of social norms. For example, when Lucille asks Sylvie why she did not have children, Sylvie responds that ““You must know, Lucille . . . that some questions are not polite”” (69). Additionally, once the town intends to take Ruth from Sylvie, Sylvie frantically tries to conform to the town’s expectations by cleaning the parlor, placing flowers on the kitchen table, and cooking chicken for Ruth (187), revealing that she is still aware of the town’s conventional norms. Sylvie is not acting out of ignorance or insanity as she turns objects into

things, using them in unconventional ways. Instead, she has recognized that this unconventionality allows her to undo the traditional structures of meaning placed on items like curtains, utensils, and phones, thereby freeing her to create her own framework of meaning and thus her own identity in relation to her belongings.

Indeed, Sylvie serves as an extension of the flood, blurring the lines between the interior of the home with man-made objects and the exterior natural world by refusing to distinguish between the inside and outside, therein challenging the singular reality of the interior of the home. Like the flood, Sylvie acknowledges no bounds and freely uses the natural world and objects of material culture in interchangeable ways, turning the natural world into part of material culture. Not only does she spend an evening sleeping on the lawn rather than her bed (103), her housekeeping eventually combines the inside with the outside, letting the natural world overrun the house: “this was the time that leaves began to gather in the corners” of the house intermingled with bits of paper. Ruth notes that as bits of the outside world made their way in that “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” (85). And eventually animals do start to inhabit the house with “crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic” (99). The natural world that the Fosters’ house is meant to exclude slowly becomes a fluid part of their household as “leaves” make a home in the corners and “crickets,” “squirrels,” and “sparrows,” take refuge inside the house. Stefan Mattessich insightfully views this collapse of inside and outside as a suggestion of the alliance of spiritual ““faith and knowledge,”” proposing that this disassembling of boundaries provides immaterial mental benefits (82). I read this space as a place where the immaterial benefits of the imagination can be accessed because as the

boundaries between elements of the natural world and the man-made world disappear, and it becomes impossible to construct reality based solely in the man-made world that excludes or limits the creative power of imagination.

Similarly, Sylvie's habit of eating in the dark makes the barrier between inside the house and the outside world indistinguishable, questioning a reality solely grounded in traditional interactions with man-made items, instead embracing a reality that also accommodates the natural world as part of material culture and imagination. For example, Ruth recalls how, "We looked out the window as we ate, and we listened to the crickets and nighthawks, which were always unnaturally loud then, perhaps because they were within the bounds that light would fix around us" (86). The "bounds that light would fix" create a barrier against the natural world—turning off the lights makes it impossible to know where one ends and the other begins, making the boundaries between inside and outside imperceptible. As Ruth observes, "[Sylvie] preferred [the house] sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude" (99). Sylvie makes traditional housekeeping and the use of light in the home seem like artificial barriers set up to keep the two worlds strictly separated. The ephemeral nature of objects is emphasized as nature merges with the inside of the house, especially in cases where the presence of nature accelerates the decay of these items. As she merges these worlds, she resists basing her reality only on her interaction with man-made elements. Unlike objects that seem to have a fixed meaning and an indefinite lifespan, nature is constantly changing, decaying, and being reborn. By equating objects of material culture with items from the natural world, Sylvie emphasizes the fluidity of meaning of these seemingly stable objects by placing them in the same category as nature. In so doing, she breaks down static, singular meanings, creating room for her own varied interpretations.

One could argue that Sylvie's attitude towards objects is a regression rather than a progression as she becomes more and more "uncivilized." Sylvie may take her unconventionality to extremes, but it is this that allows Sylvie to see herself as a changing individual and to see people around her as fluid beings and therefore resists judging people's current position in life. For example, when Sylvie comes home one day and talks about a woman she met at the train station, Lucille is intensely angry and embarrassed, calling the woman "trashy people" (104). Sylvie does not recognize her as trashy, transient, or as anything but an individual person, and invites her to dinner. By withholding judgment and resisting the urge to essentialize individuals based on their current situation, Sylvie leaves room for people around her to change and adjust because she sees that there is no one "essential" meaning of a person or object, endorsing multiplicity and plurality.

Sylvie's productive attitude towards the people around her is one of her most constructive and desirable qualities. Yet, neither Sylvie nor Lucille is either ideal or wholly flawed. Sylvie has many positive attributes: she has a healthy relationship to nature, is adept at adjusting to change, and is unfazed by social judgments. Chandler reads Sylvie's fluidity and adaptability as heroic and liberating, and calls her a "footloose heroine" with a "transcendent point of view" (300). Yet, Sylvie's fluid life is also problematic because she is emotionally erratic: Ruth notes, "Clearly our aunt was not a stable person" (82), and wonders if she has suicidal intentions (83). Additionally, Sylvie is capable of adapting to change, but does not seem to also be capable of adapting to static conditions, causing her to adopt a nomadic lifestyle, and making it difficult for her to establish a community or long-lasting connections with people around her—an essential part of human existence. Lucille similarly has both positive and negative attributes: she is able to craft her own individuality through hard work and persistence and become an accepted member of the

community by rejecting her unconventional family, but she is also obsessed with social norms and fitting in. With their combination of positive and negative qualities, neither Sylvie nor Lucille is meant to be a model for an ideal life because neither is able to create a world where both fluidity and imagination can thrive in a community of friends and family.

Ruth too is not meant to act as an ideal, but instead acts as a model for the process of establishing a unique personality and relationship to material culture. Examining Ruth in terms of her relationship to material culture reveals that she conforms to both Lucille's and Sylvie's ways of life rather than shaping her own identity. Lucille and Sylvie have clear relationships with the objects around them: Lucille sees objects as a way of detaching herself from the Foster family and redefining herself as a new person, and Sylvie sees objects as fluid and changing, conflating material culture with the natural world. Ruth, on the other hand, does not seem to have a clear relationship with material culture, but rather conforms to people around her because she is afraid of being abandoned as she has been many times already in her short life. Consumed with these fears, Ruth wants to please people in order to make them stay, and thus lives a half-life as an empty shell that is filled by the personalities of those around her. At one point she tells Sylvie, "I supposed I don't know what I think," and confesses to readers that "It was a source of both terror and comfort to me then that I often seemed invisible—incompletely and minimally existent, in fact" (105). As a framework for others' lifestyles to fill, Ruth has not developed her own opinions, and thus does not know exactly "what [she] think[s]." While Ruth recognizes that she has become "invisible," she does not know conclusively whether this recognition brings her "terror" or "comfort," indicating that she is not able to think decisive thoughts about her own feelings. In short, Ruth has not developed a unique personality. Because Ruth is such a garrulous narrator, providing pages of descriptions and thoughts, it is easy to forget that she has little

interaction with the world. Instances like this, where Ruth self-consciously reflects on her withdrawn nature and invisibility, remind readers that, while she is a verbose narrator, Ruth rarely voices her opinions and is quicker to cling to the actions of those around her than to assert her own individuality.

As a result, Ruth constantly conforms to the actions and opinions of people around her. When Lucille decides to skip school, Ruth follows her merely saying “I’ll go, too,” (78), and spends a week skipping school with Lucille. Even when Lucille starts rebelling against Sylvie’s housekeeping, Ruth admits that she conformed to her: “. . . I found, as Lucille changed, advantage in conforming my attitudes to hers” (93). Once Lucille moves out, Ruth conforms to Sylvie’s lifestyle, mimicking her actions in order to preserve her connection to people and to stave off loneliness. As Ruth follows Sylvie across the lakeshore the morning they row across the lake and hike up the valley, she states, “We are the same” (145), either conflating her own identity with Sylvie’s identity, or mimicking Sylvie’s approach to their relationship. Either interpretation reveals that Ruth has given up her own identity or opinions in order to create a relationship with Sylvie. While Sylvie and Lucille have each developed strong and unique personalities that become clear as their relationship to material culture is examined, this same approach reveals that Ruth has not asserted her individuality, but conforms to those around her. Thus, as Ruth learns to become her own person, she represents the process of establishing a unique identity.

It is essential for Ruth to recognize and embrace a personality that is her own, and one way she accomplishes this is by creating a relationship to material culture. It is her intense fear of loneliness that leads Ruth to ally herself with Sylvie even though she acknowledges Sylvie’s flaws—she is unstable and potentially suicidal. Ruth sees no option but to create a connection

with Sylvie or to face a life of loneliness, and thus Ruth adopts (or tolerates) Sylvie's approach to housekeeping. While Ruth claims that her and Sylvie are of the same kind, and recognizes that she is "now in Sylvie's dream with her" (110), it is unclear whether Ruth is choosing Sylvie's way of life because she genuinely wants to be like Sylvie, or because it is the only way to ensure that she is not abandoned.

Sylvie and Ruth's much examined attempt to burn their house down at the end of the text represents Ruth's choice to take an active role in shaping her individuality. As Ruth chooses to help burn down the house, she begins to establish her own relationship to material culture. The sheriff threatens to remove Ruth from Sylvie's care, so in the final scenes of the text Ruth and Sylvie attempt to burn down their house, "balling" up old newspapers to accelerate the flames (199), and take a perilous walk across the railroad bridge leaving behind Fingerbone, their house, and Lucille. Many feminist scholars have read this act as Ruth and Sylvie choosing to leave behind stereotypical domestic life for a new kind of female existence that has not been articulated in society yet. For example, Chandler sees this final scene as Sylvie's rejection of the "domestic life and female destiny," with Ruth and Lucille as the two possible responses to this rejection—Ruth chooses to flee the domestic sphere with Sylvie and Lucille chooses to join the town and people like her (293). Similarly, Marcia Aldrich states that "the conventional ideology of housekeeping can be seen as a clinging to forms, conforming to female fate, and as such . . . Sylvie's housekeeping and her eventual abandonment of housekeeping altogether is a reinvention of the female fate," and their chosen life of transience at the end of the text is a "declaration of existence" for Ruth and Sylvie (131). Yet their act is not merely a feminist repudiation of social norms but is also an active engagement with the world of material culture.

Indeed, reading this scene as an attempt to denaturalize the meaning of “house” by turning it into a pile of ashes allows for a broader understanding of Ruth and Sylvie’s relationship to reality.

Sylvie has created a home that represents her own conception of reality, embracing the material world alongside the natural world, but this housekeeping and use of a home is unacceptable to the town’s conventions. By going to the extreme of burning their house down, Ruth and Sylvie renounce the town’s traditional use of a “house,” and attempt to preserve their particular connection to their home and possessions that celebrates fluidity. Sylvie and Ruth recognize that the objects within their house hold specific meanings to them and contain the memories and history of their existence, so they “could not leave the house, which was stashed like a brain, a reliquary, like a brain, its relics to be pawed and sorted and parceled out among the needy and the parsimonious of Fingerbone” (209). Like a “brain” filled with thoughts and memories, their house and belongings contain remembrances that are representative of the lives they and their family have lived in the house. Preserving the house as it stands means leaving this “brain” of meanings to reinterpretation by others as they casually “paw” through and “parcel” out the items among the stingy inhabitants of Fingerbone who have no sense of the history or significance of the remnants of their lives. As Fingerbone inhabitants take their belongings, they would be reincorporated into conventional housekeeping, thus losing their fluidity of meaning.

To Ruth, leaving their objects to the fate of the town would be horrible: “In the equal light of disinterested scrutiny such things are not themselves. They are transformed into pure object, and are horrible, and must be burned” (209). People of Fingerbone, unaware of the history of the Fosters’ belongings, would view them “in the equal light of disinterested scrutiny,” unable to see the items as anything more than items of financial worth or practical use. As Ruth looks around the house knowing she will be leaving it forever, she adopts this “disinterested

scrutiny,” realizing that in the eyes of other people their house will become “pure object,” meaning the objects will turn into mere things without sentiment or meaning. With this horrifying thought, Ruth knows they must burn their house in order to protect their own relationship to their house. This relationship is one way these characters define themselves—protecting these items from appropriation by the town is an act of self-preservation. It is now that Ruth recognizes that objects help to define individuals and have meanings and sentimental value attached to them; however, just like when a car breaks down and becomes an odd configuration of parts and metal, these objects would become mere things to other people and would not hold the same meanings. To protect their stuff from being cavalierly consumed by the conventional residents of Fingerbone, they choose to set the house on fire. By seeing their house and all of their possessions as “pure object,” or things, the critical thinking that accompanies this recognition affords Ruth and Sylvie the critical imagination necessary to leave Fingerbone across the railroad bridge.

While Sylvie has accessed this imagination her whole transient life, Ruth has been conforming her identity to those around her and has not taken an active part in interacting with objects. Sylvie is adept at change and adaptation, but Ruth needs to develop this skill in order to join Sylvie in her transient way of life. The imagination these characters are able to access by burning down the house, thus rejecting the town’s traditional values of “home,” and preserving their own relationship to their belongings that encourages malleability, is immediately evidenced by the fact that they are able to imagine attempting a task that no one has done before: crossing the railroad bridge. When Sylvie first suggests walking across the bridge, Ruth is skeptical and nervous noting that, “‘Nobody’s ever done that. Crossed the bridge. Not that anybody knows of’” (210). However, Ruth is able to follow Sylvie across the bridge: “I could barely see where I

put my feet. Perhaps it was only the certainty that she was in front of me, and that I need only put my foot directly before me, that made me think I saw anything at all” (211). Ruth’s mind is erased of all expectations for crossing the dangerous bridge and while her physical eyes can not see anything through the dark, she is able to imagine with “certainty” the bridge beneath her feet and is then able to place one foot in front of the other through the darkness.

Following Sylvie across the railroad bridge at first appears to be another attempt for Ruth to conform to those around her to eschew abandonment; however, it becomes clear, that this experience is a turning point for Ruth. Ruth states that “I believe it was the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally” (215), seeming to accept her own identity as a transient individual, a border crosser, as she crosses the bridge and is “changed.” What Ruth ultimately wants is a connection to people on which she can depend. Because of this, she conforms her life to first Lucille’s personality and then to Sylvie’s way of life rather than choosing her own way of life. While it would oversimplify Ruth’s character to say that crossing the bridge finally turns her into a complete individual who is no longer defined by conforming to Sylvie’s way of life, the experience gives Ruth a sense of identity—she is able to actively choose to follow Sylvie and she becomes a new person. Ruth does initially follow Sylvie across the bridge, but she recalls that “It was so dark there might have been no Sylvie ahead of me, and the bridge might have created itself under my foot as I walked, and vanished again behind me” (212). Ruth imagines herself completely alone in the “dark,” seemingly suspended in midair since the bridge “might have created itself under [her] foot,” and “vanished again behind [her].” Yet, she still continues to cross, taking step by step away from Fingerbone and towards her chosen way of life. Unlike earlier in the book when Ruth follows Sylvie into the dark outside their house and anxiously pulls her back inside (71-72), here she is similarly encompassed by darkness, but calmly takes

step after step even without the complete assurance that Sylvie is in front of her. Recognizing that her belongings are charged with malleable meanings, and then attempting to burn her house and objects to the ground, affords Ruth the critical imagination she needs to walk across the bridge because she recognizes that her own identity is a construction that she can own and change.

Conclusion

Accessing imagination is a critical aspect of each character's development within *Housekeeping*. Imagination is the ability to conceive of ideas and images that exist beyond the concrete world. This ability is key to *Housekeeping* because it is imagination that allows characters to envision new futures, and to resist becoming sunk in a "world of mere things" that produce a "hard-edged reality," allowing them to piece together their own individuality and reality that brings together fragmented and disparate components of existence to a cohesive and adaptable whole. As individuals define and change their "self," imagination is key to both conceiving of an individuality and recognizing oneself as a changeable being, thus enabling the conceptualization of an identity that can then be created. Examining Lucille, Sylvie, and Ruth in terms of their interactions with material culture and the imagination they are able to garner from this relationship helps unfold their depth and complexity, highlighting both their flaws and redeeming qualities. For Robinson, the powers of imagination act as the end goal for all characters—from Lucille's ability to imagine a new self, to Sylvie and Ruth's impossible journey across the bridge to establish a new life together. While Derrida would want to continue deconstructing items even after they are deconstructed—as items in the house begin to turn to ash Derrida would ask "what is ash?"—the end of this mental process is the capacity to see how meaning is constructed and the imagination to envision new and better ways to construct

meaning, ideas, and hierarchies. Incorporating imagination into life enlivens reality and identity by enabling new connections, ideas, solutions, and futures.

Notes

1. For further reading, see Jacque Smyth for a discussion of vagrancy, William Burke for insights into *Housekeeping* as “an unconventional primer to the mystical life” (717), Christine Caver for an exploration of the suffocating tone of *Housekeeping* as Ruth is consumed by trauma from being abandoned multiple times, and George Handley for an ecocritical approach to *Housekeeping*, where Handley examines the interconnected relationship between nature and culture, arguing that the *Housekeeping* “follows the interdependencies that ecology implies to their most profound conclusions, most notably the point at which a renunciation of absolute certitude is necessary” (507).

2. There is a multitude of compelling textual evidence to support various feminist readings: all living characters within the text are female (Ruth and Lucille even make a female snowman [61]), the story revolves around the domestic sphere of the Foster household, and Sylvie’s unconventional housekeeping disrupts traditional modes of domesticity. Marcia Aldrich, Sonia Gernes, Paula Geyh, Phyllis Lassner, and Martha Ravits are some of the many scholars who have approached the text from various feminist perspectives. Aldrich examines Sylvie’s unconventional housekeeping and Ruth’s storytelling and argues that it is transience that brings these characters together. To Aldrich, Ruth and Sylvie reinvent the female fate by rejecting traditional housekeeping. Gernes interprets Ruth’s journey as a conversion to mysticism, which functions as an escape from the patriarchal order. With Sylvie as her mystical guide, Ruth moves through the stages of infancy, ultimately becoming reborn through Sylvie. Geyh traces evidence of Robinson’s two kinds of female subjectivity in the text: the settled (Lucille) and the transient (Ruth and Sylvia). Lassner sees Ruth and Sylvie as breaking out of a patriarchal order and becoming self-sufficient women, escaping motherhood and sisterhood and in the end they “drift

beyond the conventions of our most hallowed literary traditions” (57). Ravits looks at Ruth’s journey as a female discovery of self, where Ruth is required to deal with the loss and abandonment of her mother as she struggles to realize her identity. While the male hero’s journey has been defined by mobility and leaving the female stationary in the domestic sphere, as Ruth and Sylvia leave their home and cross the bridge into the unknown, they access this mobility. While these authors do not discuss female relationships to domesticity exclusively, they do represent the strong overtones of feminist perspectives in the scholarship on *Housekeeping*.

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