





The Properties of Water in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

Margaret True

Throughout Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, water is a central motif, informing our understanding of both individual characters and the town as a whole. This essay focuses on the character of Sylvie during the time when she was the primary caretaker for her nieces, Ruth and Lucille, and was charged with managing domestic space. Sylvie was not an instinctual homemaker and construed her "womanly duty" to fit her style of living to survive. To make these claims, the article analyzes Robinson's metaphors comparing the house to Noah's Ark, and comparing Sylvie to a mermaid on a ship.

Both allusions concern water in some way. The analysis engages spatiality theory by Michael De Certeau and Doreen Massey. All of this is to understand Sylvie as a character, the women akin to her who have been forced into a matronly role due to societal norms, and how to transform an unwelcoming space into one of comfort.



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Water is often understood as an agent that shapes space. Bodies of water mark borders or connect communities, organizing landscapes and the societies that inhabit them. Throughout Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, water is a central motif that shapes individual characters, and, in a broader sense, the whole Foster family. This essay argues that the lake and other water images create a fluid sense of space in the novel. The analysis focuses on two key metaphors: the house as Noah's Ark, and Sylvie as a mermaid out of her element. Both allusions concern water in some way. The analysis engages passages from spatiality theory by Micheal De Certeau and Doreen Massey, as well as scholarship regarding mermaids, and Biblical readings of Noah's story. All of this is to understand how the simple element of water is a complex spatial force in the literary landscape of *Housekeeping*.

Chandler Harland observes in his reading of Henry David Thoreau:

Water therefore inherently contains a double element, a double signification which, invariably, tends to project either the fear, the death of humans, or the spiritual, physical transformation of man.
(4)

The same sense of doubleness underpins Robinson's treatment of her novel's central body of water, the lake at the heart of town.

The setting of *Housekeeping* is the fictional town of Fingerbone, Idaho. Two sisters, Ruth and Lucille, are the central characters with Ruth providing first person narration throughout the story. After the shocking suicide of their mother, the sisters reside in the house that their late grandfather built, and they are under the care of different women throughout their childhood. First there is their maternal grandmother, then their grandmother's sister-in-laws, Nona and Lily, and finally the girls' Aunt Sylvie. Each caregiving

“era” alters the girls’ experience of domestic space, but it is Sylvie’s residency that drastically impacts the home and the trajectory of the novel. Sylvie changes the house’s ecosystem to align with her fluid domesticity, and unsettles conventions of order and stability. By the end of the novel, the girls have the choice to live Sylve’s nomadic unattached life or one of calm stability.

Robinson was born in 1943 in Sandpoint, Idaho, a small town that inspired her first novel, *Housekeeping*. Educated at Pembroke College, the former women’s college at Brown University, and later earning a Masters and PhD from the University of Washington, Robinson pairs rigorous intellectual training with a lyrical style. When *Housekeeping* was published in 1980, it established her as a respected author with a well-developed voice, especially for the author of a debut novel. In a speech given by Mark Athitakis in 2012 for her National Humanities Medal, he claims,

The qualities that define Robinson’s fiction emerged fully formed in that first novel: watertight sentences, an attentive voice that demands

close attention, and themes of integrity and home.

After her debut novel, Robinson did not publish another piece of fiction until 2004 with her book, *Gilead*, whose trilogy won, respectively, the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, the Orange Prize (now the Women’s Prize for Fiction), and the National Book Award.

New York Times reviewer, Anatole Broyard, notes the nuances of domesticity in *Housekeeping*, recognizing that the title of this book does not equate to the subject of the novel. He says, “Robinson’s ‘Housekeeping’ is not about housekeeping at all, but transience.” The true meaning of the book comes through to the reader when one is looking beyond the overt message to find the subtext. Broyard understands that Robinson’s writing is made for those who are willing to do literary analysis and sift for meaning. One example of Robinson’s layered use of imagery is the way in which water-based allusions throughout the novel shape the main characters, as well as how domestic spatiality paired with delinquency affects the narrative.

A Mermaid out of Her Element

The first important water-

based comparison is when Ruth says, “Sylvie in a house is more or less like a mermaid in a ship’s cabin” (Robinson 99). Christine Wilson digs deeper into this in the article, “Delinquent Housekeeping: Transforming the Regulations of Keeping Home.” She brings to light the fact that mermaids do not belong on ships, just as Sylvie does not belong in the house (304). Sylvie makes it obvious to readers that she feels captive being the one forced to keep house—she is kept instead of doing the keeping. Wilson points out that a mermaid’s home is the ocean, a place of flow and transience. Similarly, Sylvie is most comfortable in the transient life of riding on the rails. Digging deeper into the mermaid comparison helps us to understand that Sylvie does not belong there and must make accommodations for her to feel a sense of peace.

To understand the symbolism of Sylvie being compared to a mermaid, one must understand the history and symbolic traits of mermaids. Folklore states that mermaids are beings who hold control in multiple ways: being able to control the weather and the waves. This power is reinforced in a familiar present-day example, Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*,

when a character comments that the beautiful weather must be due to King Triton’s benevolent mood. Often for these abilities mermaids are viewed as manipulative, however, “It is not unheard-of for a mermaid to value human life and desire to save it” (Knight 20). This characterization of mermaids echoes Harland’s sense of the doubleness of water. Knight says, “Many scholars neglect to recognize that the mermaid is a hybrid symbol: she signifies more than one thing at a time” (19). The ocean is an uncontrollable force that is impossible to manipulate, but a mermaid finds their own sense of control within this environment. Additionally, mermaids can usually only exist in the ocean where they wield power, but they are unable to exist on land as humans and other animals do. Thus, mermaids are simultaneously powerful and vulnerable, depending on the space they inhabit.

Mermaids’ supernatural ability to control the elements around them parallels Sylvie’s strategies of shaping her environment as a coping mechanism during her homemaking years. Having spent years riding trains, she attempts to create an environment that is akin to the one that she was taken out of.

A normal person could not resist mermaids' powers (controlling weather, etc.), and Sylvie, likewise, begins to influence her nieces, Ruth and Lucille. As the matriarch of the house, she sets the tone and the girls have no choice but to react to it. Many of the habits that Sylvie gained from living in such an unstable environment she only transfigured slightly. Ruth says, "It seemed to me that if she remained transient here, she would not have to leave" (Robinson 103). Some of the ways in which she remained transient were wearing her coat constantly, refusing to unpack her belongings, and sleeping outside of the house. These are obvious habits of someone who doesn't live in a single place. She could have chosen to adapt to her new unwelcome space, but instead, like mermaids, Sylvie stays true to their narrative. She insists on a mobility that unsettles the town's expectations of womanhood.

When Ruth compares her nonconformist aunt to a mermaid in a ship's cabin she explains, "she preferred [the house] sunk in the very element that it was meant to exclude" (Robinson 99). What Ruth is saying is that mermaids do not belong on ships; that is not their habitat. A mermaid cannot swim

or survive anywhere on dry land. Sylvie is similarly unable to survive out of her element.

Sylvie is transient in the way that mermaids are as well, traveling from place to place and not being known to stay anywhere for a long period of time. Before she is bequeathed the responsibility of her young nieces, Sylvie had been a "delinquent" who lived on the railways in the Great Depression. Her ways of living are judged harshly by the general population. The women of the town sit in the house's parlor with their niceties attempting to bring order to the girls' life that they believed Sylvie could not provide (179-180). In a way, Sylvie's existence living on the rails is as mythical to the townspeople as a mermaid's existence—too fantastical and not stable enough.

Mermaids are sometimes portrayed as oppressed or misunderstood creatures in their folklore, which correlates with them also being primarily portrayed as women. They appear as damsels that either need saving from men, at times being captured by fisherman. In Sylvie's case, there is a feeling of captivity in the role imposed on her by patriarchal forces. Her life is policed through the expectations

that women must be homemakers. Doreen Massey's work in *Space, Place, and Gender* shows that home is an example of a gendered space. She says,

And this gendering of space both reflects and has effects *back* on the way in which gender is constructed and understood in the societies in which we live (186).

Massey understood this at a young age and later realized that she could, “[m]ultiply such examples” (186), proving that the home is unfortunately not the only space that has become gendered. Gendered spaces are oppressive, and damages both society and individuals. In Sylvie's case, she does not fully submit to gendered roles, but she definitely feels the oppression of them. Her rejection of expectations through her remaking of domestic duties and spaces, becomes its own critique of the norms imposed on her.

Sylvie's Ark

The second water-based allusion is the way in which the house acts as an ark, with specific mentions towards the Biblical story of Noah's ark. Both Noah's ark and the family home in *Housekeeping* are built out of found materials

by the family patriarch, and both manage to survive drastically changing environments. In the story of Noah and his family from the book of Genesis, God is not pleased with how far humans have strayed from his will so he says,

I will wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds, the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them (Genesis 6:7).

He decides to flood the entirety of Earth but chooses to spare Noah and his family by giving Noah specific instructions on how to build an ark that will ensure their survival. The flood lasts forty days and forty nights (Genesis 7:4) and, ultimately, “Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died” (Genesis 7:22). After the flood, Noah, his family, and the animals they brought are the only inhabitants on Earth. This event was a chance for the creatures of the Earth to reset themselves in alignment with God's will instead of according to human imperfection. After the flood, the ark's inhabitants continue with their lives as usual and focus on rebuilding what the flood had destroyed. God keeps his promise

and there are no other accounts in the Bible of this extreme of a flood recurring.

The biggest similarity, bigger than the fact that both “arks” were built by the patriarch of the house, is that both vessels are protecting their inhabitants from the tumultuous environment around them. In Noah’s tale, the threat of water is physically more imminent and a life-ending problem. The storm that wiped every creature off the face of the Earth was miraculously not capable of destroying the sturdy ark. In *Housekeeping*, the water that the house is protecting them from is not a direct physical threat, but more a looming mental threat to the family. The water from the lake has caused significant generational trauma for the family which has been passed down from the grandmother to Ruth and Lucille. At the beginning of the book readers learn that Edmund Foster, the patriarch of the novel’s characters, had a career of working on the railroad, which subsequently led to his untimely death. A train crashes into the lake, killing the passengers aboard, including Edmund (Robinson 8). This leads to the Foster’s matriarch raising her daughters as a single parent.

Years later, one of these daughters, Helen, is raising two

girls by herself when she drops them off at her mother’s house. While they are sitting on their grandmother’s porch, she uses her neighbor’s car to drive into the lake (Robinson 23). This ultimately kills her, paralleling the way that her father had died years before. Regardless of this generational trauma, the house stays sturdy and steadfast. When things are changing, the family home that Edmund built remains intact.

Another similarity between the two stories is the idea that what happened in rocky waters is not known to the survivors of the accidents. During the vast flood that God created, the people and animals who were physically in the flood died, and there was no trace of them afterwards. In *Housekeeping*, there is little to no closure regarding either Edmund’s or Helen’s deaths. Both accidents come as a sudden shock to those left behind. The water contains answers that the main characters of the novel are unable to access. Where is the train that went into the lake with Edmund’s body and is it still there? Was Ruth and Lucille’s mother’s death purposeful or was it an accidental slip? The water keeps these secrets.

Michael De Certeau’s discussion of “Spatial Stories”

in *The Practice of Everyday Life* offers a useful framework for understanding how things can exert force as delinquents: people/entities that were supposed to be eliminated but are remaining in “nature, in our home, in streets” (129). Although a physical or concrete form may have been destroyed, De Ceretau argues that their presence can continue past their death. The example that he uses is how at the fall of antiquity the popularity of Greek gods went away, but their presence in the places they were influential continued. Similarly, tragic incidents continue to shape the Foster family’s existence for generations. The stories of Edmund and Helen in the lake “haunt the narrative” of their family, and the town.

In an act not unlike Noah’s, Sylvie must adapt the family’s home to navigate turbulent waters. The house existed years before Sylvie was its primary caretaker, which also shows the transformation that the house is capable of. Wilson says,

The invocation of Noah’s ark implies the possibility of rebuilding domesticity and functions as a logical conclusion to Sylvie’s unconventional, boundary-

breaking housekeeping. (305) Ultimately, both Noah’s ark and the Fingerbone house can negotiate water. Wilson argues that “Rather than deny the inherent instability of the house, and more largely of a potential stable home, Robinson fabricates a domesticity that can negotiate instability with ease” (306).

Conclusion

Water serves as a structuring principle in *Housekeeping*. It holds trauma that creates the exigence of the novel, proving that water holds the ability to create and mold people, as well as experiences. Similarly tragic incidents continue to shape the Foster family’s existence for generations. Robinson uses the mention of mermaids and Noah’s Ark to show how the lake is a source of both family trauma and adaptability.

Chandler Harland writes, “The constant attention given by people to water is mainly due to its ability to create fantasy and explain the origin of things” (6). In the case of *Housekeeping*, water creates a space in which a “mermaid” such as Sylvie can thrive, compared to the stable domestic space that constricts her instead. On the other hand, water’s unpredictable nature shows that to create survival for yourself,

and others, turbulence must be embraced instead of rejected. Water as a central theme in *Housekeeping* shows human potential to adapt to fluid spaces.

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