

Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping is a hauntingly beautiful tale, a *bildungsroman* that follows the development of two young girls whose growth through adolescence is continually shadowed and complicated by maternal abandonment and suicide. Left at their grandmother's porch as their mother drives off a bridge, Ruth and Lucille are raised by a series of female relatives. This largely female cast has proved particularly alluring to feminist critics, who are perhaps too eager to claim Ruth and Sylvie's ultimate departure from the patriarchal, symbolic order as a story of feminist victory. Kristin King's analysis of the novel tempers the claim of other feminist critics by skillfully demonstrating how "the novel's feminist charge resides equally in the tension it *sustains* between symbolic and semiotic realms" (565). Drawing from the language and work of Julia Kristeva, King makes it clear that Ruth, despite her obvious links to the semiotic, is quite unwilling to relinquish all ties to the symbolic. Her role as narrator, for example, is firmly located in the linguistic order. It is worthwhile to widen this critical lens even further and include Kristeva's view of the semiotic as not just a source of creativity and joy, but as a source of horror and depression. In so doing, the critic is open to explore a deep sadness in Ruth, whose life seems driven more by a desire to replace loss than by a search for self-fulfillment. Such an interpretation helps explain why this feminist "victory" feels so hollow, and why Lucille—who strives to individuate and find a role in society—need no longer be marginalized in feminist discussions of this novel.

A brief overview of Kristeva's theory is in order here, especially as some of the terminology associated with her is potentially confusing. Julia Kristeva, a primary figure in "French Feminism," draws on her rich psychoanalytic background to explore women's issues. Generally considered a Lacanian psychoanalyst, she nonetheless has made some

significant breaks with Lacan's thinking and terminology. Like Lacan, she believes that a child's movement from the pre-Oedipal to the Oedipal is marked by the development of subjectivity located within and constituted by language. For Lacan, this passage (his "Mirror Stage") marks the child's movement from the realms of the Real and the Imaginary into the realm of the Symbolic. Kristeva, while abandoning the Lacanian terms Real and Imaginary for her own term "semiotic" (not to be confused with semiotics, the study of sign systems), maintains the concept of subjectivity arising from movement into a symbolic realm (Lacan's use of the word "symbolic" is typically capitalized while Kristeva's is not). Kristeva's semiotic refers to a prelinguistic arena associated with the mother's body, its rhythms, and a lack of differentiation between self and others.

It is in discussion of this semiotic realm that Kristeva's theory becomes "revolutionary." Her work Revolution in Poetic Language contends that "the subject is always *both semiotic and symbolic*" (24). For her, "the dialectic between them determines the type of discourse (narrative, metalanguage, theory, poetry, etc.)...."(24). Dance, music, poetry-- any creative discourse which bears the traces of the maternal body--these are all seen as deriving from incursions of the semiotic into the symbolic. This interplay of the semiotic and the symbolic, then, is an exciting concept in the study of creativity. Significantly, despite Kristeva's associating the semiotic with the mother and the symbolic with the father, the ability to access these drives is *not* gender specific. In fact, James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake is frequently cited as an example of writing that illustrates significant semiotic influences. Hélène Cixous, another contemporary "French Feminist," has labeled this style "écriture féminine."

Creativity can thus be seen as a positive result of semiotic drives. Kristeva's later works, however, explore the darker aspects of the semiotic. In Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, Kristeva posits that failure to adequately break away from the pre-oedipal mother-child dyad (something she describes as a failure to commit matricide) results in weak symbolic formation and potential mood disorder. "Matricide," Kristeva claims, "is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation" (Black Sun 27, 28). She insists on the need for a "third term" (usually the father) to assure this individuation. The child must "identify no longer with the lost object but with a third party—father, form, schema.... [This] insures the subject's entrance into the universe of signs and creation" (Black Sun 23). In the absence of a third party, impetus for symbolic structure is absent or weak, and regression into an undifferentiated semiotic state becomes a dominant characteristic. Asymbolia, the failure to use language, can result.

Robinson's book Housekeeping <sup>agr</sup> manifests this symbolic/semiotic dialectic as a struggle between house and lake. The order and stability of the house is constantly threatened by the lake's power to flood, rupture structures, and efface the boundaries between land, air and water. The lake's water also has a long history of claiming lives, including those of Ruth's mother and grandfather. Like Kristeva's semiotic, the lake is a mix of creative and destructive forces. The same water that floods the land and generates new growth in the spring will later destroy homes and claim lives. Also like the semiotic, the lake is a thing of constant flux and fluidity, something whose presence hovers in and around, palpable even in its absence. "One is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone," Ruth states, "... When the ground is plowed in the spring, cut and laid open, what exhales from the furrows but that same, sharp, watery smell. The wind is watery...water suspended in

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sunlight, sharp as the breath of an animal, which brims inside this circle of mountains” (9). Vigilance is required to keep the house and land in order, to prevent the lake from reclaiming the land.

The vigilance Robinson alludes to is also a spiritual and psychic one, as in the Christian injunction to “Keep one’s house in order.” In Kristevan terms, this can be seen as the need for the symbolic to impose some kind of structure on the semiotic. It is just this ordering that proves so difficult for Ruth. Ruth, who is certainly aware of the loss of her mother, has nonetheless never had this separation clarified by the intervention of a “third term.” Her dead mother, in fact, is a continuing presence that constantly hovers on the periphery of Ruth’s existence. It is especially prevalent in her dreams and memories. Walking through town, she disassociates from the gaze of strangers by “thinking about my mother. In my dream I had waited for her confidently...Such confidence was like a sense of imminent presence, a palpable displacement, the movement in the air before the wind comes” (121). This is a far cry from the “matricide” that Kristeva claims is essential to healthy emotional development. It is, instead, an unhealthy preoccupation that prohibits Ruth’s assimilation into the symbolic realm. Ruth conflates Sylvie with her mother. Watching Sylvie comb her hair in front of a mirror, Ruth comments, “Sylvie’s head falls to the side and we see the blades of my mother’s shoulders and the round bones at the top of her spine. Helen is the woman in the mirror, the woman in the dream, the woman remembered, the woman in the water, and her nerves guide the blind fingers that touch into place all the falling strands of Sylvie’s hair” (131,132). Later, she even goes so far as to call Sylvie “Helen” (167). Her thoughts at that time:

Anyone that leans to look into a pool is the woman in the pool, anyone who looks into our eyes is the image in our eyes, and these things are true without argument, and so our thoughts reflect what appears before them. But there are difficulties...the faceless shape in ~~from~~ of me could as well be Helen herself as Sylvie. I spoke to her by the name Sylvie, and she did not answer. Then how was one to know? And if she were Helen in my sight, how could she not be Helen in fact? (166,167)

There are difficulties indeed. Ruth is caught in a Lacanian *mise en abyme*, a series of constantly reflecting images that accentuate her decentered position. The metaphor of Lacan's "mirror stage" is particularly apt here, and it is significant that this Lacanian concept coincides with Kristeva's point of a subject's accession into the symbolic order. This move proves impossible for Ruth, whose relationships with her sister and aunt can be seen as attempts to reclaim the fluid boundaries of self which characterize the mother-child dyad. She describes her relationship with Lucille, for example, as "almost a single consciousness," and of her ultimate relationship with Sylvie she notes, "the measure of our intimacy [was] that she gave almost no thought to me at all" (98,195). The boundary between Self and Other is never fully realized.

Fragmented and ethereal, Ruth's worldview is characterized by deep sadness and a yearning for structure: "[Lucille and I] walked the blocks from the lake to our grandmother's house, jealous to the point of rage of those who were already accustomed to the light and the somnolent warmth of the houses we passed" (35). "What are all these fragments for" she asks, "if not to be knit up finally?" (92). This is not a young woman who rejoices in freedom from society's strictures, this is a "towering child" whose

language is notable for its frequent references to loss and loneliness (97). To be separated from Sylvie, Ruth states, "could indeed lead to loneliness intense enough to make one conspicuous in bus stations" (68). Later, discussing people in bus stations, she imagines that, for them, "loneliness is an absolute discovery," and she refers to "the embarrassments of loneliness" (157,158).

It is the threat of this loneliness that ultimately pushes Ruth into full acceptance of Sylvie's transient lifestyle. Lucille's move into Miss Royce's home leaves Ruth feeling isolated and her need to maintain some semblance of the mother-child dyad is compelling. "Anyone with one solid human bond," she claims, "is that smug, and it is the smugness as much as the comfort and safety that lonely people covet and admire. I had been, so to speak, turned out of house now long enough to have observed this in myself" (154). This "turning out of house," this weakening attachment to the symbolic order, is something that Ruth associates with the loneliness of the homeless and transient, with the ghosts of abandoned children.

Seeking out these ghosts occasions the night on the lake with Sylvie-- a night which marks a point of no return for Ruth. This is when the lake truly claims her, when her thoughts most clearly reveal a willingness to be reabsorbed into the semiotic. With prayerlike formality she states, "Let them come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone, and I would rather be with [the ghost children]" (159). Having made the connection between house and body explicit, Ruth then goes on to connect this longing to a desire for reunion with the mother:

If I could see my mother, it would not have to be her eyes, her hair. I would not need to touch her sleeve. There was no more the stoop of her high shoulders. The lake had taken that, I knew. It was so very long since the dark had swum her hair, and there was nothing more to dream of, but often she almost slipped through any door I saw from the side of my eye, and it was she, and not changed, and not perished. She was a music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished. (160)

These words, so full of longing for her mother, are immediately followed by scenes replete with symbolic rebirth. Sylvie steps into the role of mother and draws Ruth back into the soothing rhythms of the semiotic by "sway[ing] us to some slow song she did not sing" (160). A new dyad is established: "I could feel the pleasure she took in my dependency, and more than once she stooped to look into my face...It was as if she were studying her own face in a mirror" (161). Lying in the bottom of the boat, wrapped in Sylvie's coat, Ruth feels "like a seed in a husk" waiting for the shell to fall away so that she, "the nub, the sleeping germ" could come to "parturition in some form" (162).

Sadly, this rebirth is also a regression. The yearning for home and structure that characterized Ruth at the beginning of the novel is replaced by an acceptance of its loss. "I would be lost to ordinary society," she comments, "I would be a ghost" (183). Ruth begins to show evidence of the symptoms Kristeva associates with a fragile symbolic *were so  
than already* order. Ruth loses her ability to communicate with Lucille: "It seemed Lucille was talking to me. I think she said that I need not stay with Sylvie....I am sure that she spoke to me in all sober kindness, but I could not hear a word she said" (175). Now Ruth claims to "[speak] only to Sylvie" (183). This movement toward asymbolia is explicitly evidenced

in Ruth's comment, "it was absurd to think that things were held in place, are held in place, by a web of words" (200). Her sense of self has been reduced to a slim "I," and even "that slenderest word," she states, "is too gross for the rare thing I was then" (214).

In contrast to her own slim "I," Ruth describes Lucille as having "eyes" wide open to Sylvie's instability. While Ruth acknowledges that "clearly our aunt was not a stable person," it is Lucille who repeatedly attempts to expose the inconsistencies in Sylvie's stories and the inadequacies of her housekeeping. One summer evening, for example, as the three sat together in darkness, Lucille suddenly "stood up and pulled the chain of the overhead light" (100). In doing so, she exposed:

the cluttered kitchen...[the] heaps of pots and dishes, the two cupboard doors which had come unhinged...Everywhere the paint was chipped and marred. A great shadow of soot loomed up the wall and across the ceiling above the stove, and the stove pipe and the cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust. (101)

Lucille refuses complicity with Sylvie's style of housekeeping, a housekeeping whose goal appears to be the gradual devolution of house into earth. Earlier, when Sylvie first arrived, Lucille had fired a series of blunt questions: "Would you tell us about [our mother]?...But what was she *like*?...What was [our father] like? What kind of work did he do?" (50,51). These evidence Lucille's desire for a solid foundation to her personal story, a foundation upon which she might build an identity. Sylvie fails to provide the structure Lucille seeks. Ruth remarks of their different attitudes toward Sylvie: "I was content with Sylvie, so it was a surprise to me when I realized that Lucille had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not-too-distant shore" (92). Lucille does



not wish to drown in the vague and timeless semiotic realm which has absorbed her aunt and which appears to be claiming her sister.

The lifeline thrown to Lucille comes in the form of Miss Royce. A Home Economics teacher, Miss Royce is devoted to the study of keeping house, of imposing structure and preventing disorder. She provides Lucille with Kristeva's "third term," a person who acts as "paternal metaphor" and facilitates creation of the psychic space necessary for movement into the symbolic. Sensing the deterioration of her own home structure, Lucille is eager to gain admittance into a stable environment. She "walked around [Miss Royce's] house, rapping at every window she could reach, until...she was invited in" (140).

Lucille's need to escape coincides with her physical maturation. This parallel highlights the developmental appropriateness of Lucille's movement toward selfhood. Ruth's physical maturation, in contrast, seems frozen in time. "While [Lucille] became a small woman," says Ruth, "I became a towering child" (97). Lucille intuitively realizes that staying with Sylvie would hinder her emotional growth. She relates a dream: "I was a baby, lying on my back, yelling, and then someone came and started wrapping me up in blankets. She put them all over my face, so I couldn't breathe. She was singing and holding me, and it was sort of nice, but I could tell she was trying to smother me" (120). This dream accurately reveals both the allure and the danger of the semiotic realm. For Lucille, it is time to assimilate into the symbolic.

It is not coincidental that Lucille's determination to "make something of herself" evidences itself as a wholehearted embrace of language (132). In full accord with Kristeva's idea of selfhood as being constituted in and by language, Lucille "threw

very good

herself down in the grass with Ivanhoe and The Light That Failed and Wuthering Heights and Little Men and National Geographic..." (132). She begins to keep a diary. Ruth senses that she herself "was more the image of Sylvie with every day that passed," and knows "Lucille [will] soon be gone" (133,134). The contrast between the two sisters is particularly pointed in the scene where they're called into the principal's office. Lucille does most of the talking for herself and Ruth. The principal comments to Ruth, "You're going to have to learn to speak for yourself, and think for yourself..." (135).

Unfortunately, Ruth never does quite learn to speak for self. The narrator of Robinson's novel is speaking for a dyad, for the "we" of "Sylvie and I." The sadness of Ruth and Sylvie's position at the end of the novel is underscored by Ruth's word choice. She tells the reader that she and Sylvie "had to leave," that they were "cast out to wander" (209). They do not click their heels with glee as they joyfully escape patriarchy. It is reductive to <sup>rep</sup>reduce this novel to a simple opposition between matriarchy and patriarchy. Feminists, any humanist for that matter, would do better to recognize the rich and complex interactions needed for individuation. In a society where family structures are undergoing radical changes, Kristeva's theories and Robinson's work suggest a more fruitful feminist agenda. With single parent homes and same sex marriage on the rise, careful study is needed to determine how teachers, social workers, family friends, therapists and others can provide that needed "third party." Ruth claims, "The sorrow is that every soul is put out of house" (179). Perhaps, but the joy is that a healthy individual is then free to build a new and more personalized home.

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