

2022

Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping Read through the Conceptual Prism of "Tethers"

Sarah Street
smstre22@g.holycross.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Street, Sarah (2022) "Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping Read through the Conceptual Prism of "Tethers"," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2022, Article 9.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2022/iss1/9>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Criterion by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* Read through the Conceptual Prism of "Tethers"

Sarah Street

College of the Holy Cross

In Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, she positions her central characters in relation to a greater surround and depicts their pursuit to find their place within it. Ruth, Robinson's central protagonist, her sister Lucille, and her aunt Sylvie are living in Fingerbone, a town in Idaho in which the environment plays a large role in their lives. Not only is Fingerbone flooded every year by the lake on its border, but the characters have also lost family members to this very lake. The relationship of Ruth with the surround shifts as she works through the trauma of loss and becomes more comfortable with the notion of impermanence. The characters' relation with the surround can be understood through those things that "tether" (204) them — to each other, to Fingerbone, and to their preferred modes of living. As the characters of *Housekeeping* grapple with notions of impermanence, transience, and stagnancy, they must reconcile with both those things that tether them, those tethers that do not exist or have been released, and even more importantly, the tethers they want to break free from. By reading *Housekeeping* through the conceptual prism of the word "tethers" and understanding the relation of the characters' with darkness and light, one can see both the escapable and inescapable "tethers of need" (204) that exist in human life and how these correlate with their relationships to an unsympathetic surround.

The characters, especially Ruthie, have a paradoxical relationship with the dark in which it brings both fear and a sense of freedom; Ruth's growing affinity with darkness allows her to break some of her tethers of need and situate herself as a part of the greater surround. At the beginning of the novel, the dark and everything that comes with it brings a sense of fear and impermanence that subordinates the characters to their greater environment. When Ruth and Lucille are out practicing their skating on the lake late into the night, Ruth remarks that as they started for home, they "...would become aware of the darkness, too close to [them], like a presence in a dream" (35). In this moment, Ruth finds comfort in the lights of the town and imagines the

houses falling and the lights all going out and how, if this were the case, "...the bitter darkness would step nearer" (35). The darkness is the thing with agency, not the human, and the surround is the thing with power, not the human. Lucille and Ruth are small in this greater surround and the dark has a power over them that is scary, yet at the same time, this does not stop them from staying out in the dark. While it may serve as an escape from civilization for a time, the girls are still tethered to each other and their home and appreciate these ties to warmth and light and an ultimate escape from this cold and frightening surround.

As the novel progresses, Sylvie's odd mothering and transient personality accustom Ruthie to life in the dark but simultaneously push Lucille further away towards life in the light. For example, Sylvie serves the girls dinner in the dark and as they eat, they would look out the window and Ruth considers how they "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, or perhaps because one sense is a shield for the others and we had lost our sight" (86). Ruth reflects about how the darkness has allowed her to hear more fully because of the absence of sight. While she does not seem to mind the opening of her senses in this alternate way of living, Lucille has tethers to the "common persuasion," (83) — that is, her notion of the right way to live is how she imagines others live, be that a clean kitchen, eating meat and rice, and sewing one's own clothes. While Ruth thought of herself and Lucille as almost one consciousness before Lucy came, it is Sylvie's introduction to a life different than typical that pulls them apart, this life different than typical being a life that seems to blur the lines between the inside of the house and the outside. One evening when the three are eating in the dark, Lucille suddenly turns on the light and "the window went black and the cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone before as this world from the primal darkness" (100). It is here that Ruth gives insight to her notions of impermanence as they relate to darkness as well as what makes her and Lucille different. Ruth has dealt her whole life with those things she wishes were permanent not being so — from the alleged suicide of her mother, to the death of her grandmother, and of course, to the simple fact that Fingerbone itself seems only to be a way station for most, while her and Lucille stagnate, tethered to it. In the dark, nothing is permanent and while this impermanence is difficult to deal with on one hand, on the other, maybe that makes the perishability of things easier to manage — if one is tethered to nothing, then maybe one needs nothing. So, when Lucille turns on the light so suddenly, Ruth is startled with a surround that "leaped...into

being” even though it was there the whole time.

As the dark and light are juxtaposed, so are Ruth and Lucille, sisters who at one time were so close that they represented the ideal behind a “lighted window,” (158) but ultimately take strikingly opposite paths as a transient and a person of the “common persuasion.” Lucille has a different understanding of darkness than Ruth (though we only get Ruth’s perspective in her first-person narrative) and on the night the two girls camp out on the shore, Ruth expounds, “Lucille would tell this story differently. She would say I fell asleep, but I did not. I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones” (116). In the darkness, Ruth becomes a part of the surround and seems to release the tethers to her humanness, allowing the darkness around her to become “coextensive” with the darkness inside of herself. She goes on to say that “everything that falls upon the eye is apparition” and “darkness is the only solvent” (116). For her, while things may seem permanent in the light, they are not really, and darkness is the thing that exposes their true nature. In the light, Ruth is insecure, Ruth does not make friends easily, Ruth feels “...small in the landscape, and out of place” (79) and the tethers of need — need for people, for acceptance, for belonging — feel all the more palpable. However, when it goes dark, all of these tethers of need seem to release and Ruth can become less “out of place” and more connected with her surround. Like when Ruth has a nightmare in the kitchen, she states “I knew that my decay, now obvious and accelerating, should somehow be concealed for decency’s sake...I began to hope for oblivion” (119). So, while this tether of so-called “decency” is present in a lighted kitchen, Ruth prays for a darkness and “oblivion” that would break that tether.

Robinson employs a symbol of a “lighted window” or “lighted house” and what it is like to be inside versus outside of it; yet, Ruth’s understanding of what inside or outside is like changes. When Sylvie leaves Ruth alone during their outing, Ruth cannot seem to ignore the whispering of “half-wild, lonely children...something Lucille and [her] together would ignore” (154). However, Lucille is not with her any longer and now Ruth too is lonely which causes her to lament that “Having a sister or a friend is like sitting in a lighted house. Those outside can watch if they want, but you need not see them” (154). When Ruth and Lucille were together and Ruth had “one solid human bond,” (154) she was positioned inside the window; but now, without Lucille and all alone, she is just another lonely person who is looking into the window and wishing she was on the other side. This is one of the tethers of human need, the need for connection, the tether or “bond”

between two people that allow them to transcend loneliness and subordinate the rest of the world to them, rather than the world subordinating them to it. Later, Ruth resolves that when "...one looks from the darkness into the light...one sees all the difference between here and there, this and that" (158). Ruth's journey of self-discovery and relation to the greater surround presents us with the notion that "Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts" (158) wishing that they were on the other side of the window, yet she goes on, by choice, to become one of those unsheltered people herself.

Ruth, comfortable living her life in the dark, is tied to her journey of accepting the unknown for what it is: unknown. Ruth spends her life in constant expectation ever since her mother disappeared into the watery depths of the lake and died. She can never stop thinking of all the possibilities that another moment may bring, though each moment never does differ much from the one before. She expects that any moment her mother may return, that what she has been dreaming will all come true, that things will become all knit up, but these things never happen. For, it is the catastrophe of things that give them meaning and all this expectation, should it result in an actual occurrence, would ultimately leave Ruth's life entirely meaningless. For Ruth, "the habit of waiting and expectation...makes any present moment most significant for what it does not contain" (214). The catastrophe of her mother's death makes her relationship with her mother meaningful, and makes her see her mother everywhere, just as it is the catastrophe of her grandfather dying in a "spectacular derailment" (5) that makes her even think about this grandfather she never knew. The very perishability of things make them of consequence and as Sylvie and Ruth row back to Fingerbone, they find themselves "...tethered to the old wreck on the lake floor. It was the wind that made [them] hover there" (170). Why are they tethered to this disaster that happened before they were born? Because of the expectation of what may be lying beneath them, of what may have happened, and then since it is the "wind" that holds them there, that is, the surround, this means they have no real control over it. Ruth wants to break these tethers of expectation, break her tether to Fingerbone, break her tether to the common persuasion and to what is expected of her, and it seems she can only do this in the dark and alone. One night when Ruth is hiding in the orchard, she has this revelation: "...if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort...hunger has its pleasures, and I was happily at ease in the dark, and in general, I could feel myself breaking the tethers of need, one by one" (204). This is the moment when Ruth finally breaks free of her life of expectation, of her life tethered to her past and the catastrophe of it, to her life

tethered to certain people and modes of living. By breaking these “tethers of need” and only being able to do so “happily at ease in the dark,” she learns that should she not resist so much, her fear of everything — of the dark and this greater unsympathetic surround and loss and impermanence— dissipates.

Thus, transience serves as a mode for Ruth and Sylvie to break away from those tethers that exist when one stays still and allows them to become at peace with their place in the world rather than constantly longing for a permanence that fundamentally cannot exist. From the moment Sylvie is introduced, she brings a sense of transience into the household that while on one hand, “Lucille hated,” (103) on the other, Ruth is drawn to. Especially when Lucille leaves and Ruth begins spending more time with Sylvie without the pull of the “common persuasion,” (93) Ruth begins to resemble Sylvie more and more and become more akin with her ways of living. Ruth does not mind that Sylvie leaves the windows of the house open and eats in the dark in some strange effort to blur the lines between the inside of the house and the greater surround. Actually, she appreciates Sylvie’s bringing her transient lifestyle to the house because that means she is planning on being permanent, or in other words, planning to stay. The people of the town begin to fear what they see going on, maybe rightly so, but mostly, it seems, because they do not want Ruth to be “lost to ordinary society,” (183) or, that is, to be “other.” To them, as Ruth realizes, “Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient of me,” (177) but what Ruth realizes that those concerned neighbors do not is that transients are to be pitied and strike fear in the hearts of the normal and ordinary people because “...they are not very different from us” (178). Well, the people, in the end, are not successful in “saving” Ruth from this sad transient life, as she and Sylvie disappear into the dark and leave the tethers of their former life behind. They let the people believe they died and they disappear and “become extraordinary in [their] vanishing” (195) and let the town believe that like so many before them, nature swallowed them whole. It is the house itself that separates humans from their greater surround and by leaving the house behind, Ruth once and for all takes her place as a part of the greater surround rather than trying to escape it like she had been doing by living conventionally her entire life. It is only by living transiently that Ruth can break some of the tethers that had been choking her and live life in the “odd” way that maybe is more right for her.

In the end, Ruth never truly does break all these tethers of human need or truly deal with impermanence. She questions if maybe it is better to have nothing to begin with and then nothing to lose. Yet, despite her giving up her home and submitting to transience and losing Lucille, she still proves this

notion wrong because of her immense loneliness when she is alone. She needs Sylvie and despite her transience, Sylvie remains with her and despite having even Sylvie, the book still ends with Ruth thinking of Lucille. Ruth will always be tethered by her need for human connection and maybe darkness will always be “the only solvent” (116) to this need. In the dark, she can imagine things are there though she does not truly know. Her need for human connection can never truly be met in the light because, in the light, language is necessary and language itself recognizes the failure of coexistence. But, in the dark, language goes away and Ruth finally truly does coexist with not only humans but *everything* around her. While in light, there are some tethers of need that are broken in darkness, there are others that are adversely broken in light. While being inside a lighted window may seem all well and good, maybe life on the outside is not as bad as one may expect. Throughout the novel, Ruth learns that while darkness may bring fear, it somehow simultaneously brings peace and comfort and true connection with this greater surround that does not care whether you are comfortable or not. When considering Robinson’s portrayal of her characters’ relation to the greater surround, it is ultimately the tethers of need that the surround both causes in certain cases and breaks in others that dictate how they cope with their place as a subordinate to this thing much more powerful than them.

Bibliography

Robinson, Marilynne. *Housekeeping*. New York, NY: Picador, 2004.