

Study Questions for Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Housekeeping*, first published, by Farrar, Straus, Giroux, in 1980.

For future readers of these study questions: The page numbers below are from the 2004 Picador paperback edition of *Housekeeping*.

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*: Questions and Proposals

Let's begin with two major questions, which will be asked again later in this document, in different ways.

1. Why does Ruth spend so much time describing water and the surface between water and air? What does she want that returning repeatedly to this image (and images like it) will satisfy?
2. And, what does she ultimately achieve with those descriptions/ images? Let us propose that what she achieves is a kind of vision, or metaphysics. What are the contents of that metaphysics? How does the world work, let's say, in the Gospel according to Ruth?

Those are tough questions (I think.) Yet I'd like to pursue them because they may be the best way to get us closer to the heart of the novel. If we don't treat Ruth's descriptions as motivated—-if we don't treat them as an activity that comes from need, and interest—artistic? psychological? emotional? metaphysical? all of the above?—-then they'll just read as excess padding in a story that's "really" about two sisters and their eccentric aunt. I would like to propose those descriptions as Ruth's defining *action* in the book, and I would like to propose that action as a transfiguring one.

Below, then, is some background information to help you gain purchase on these questions (and on the novel.) This "background information" comes mostly from an interview with Robinson conducted by a writer for the literary journal, *Tin House*, on the eve of the publication of Robinson's 2004 novel, *Gilead*. It will include, first, some remarks of Robinson's about her pursuits as a scholar of 19th century American literature (in which she earned a Ph.D. before setting out to write *Housekeeping*); second, her thoughts about the 19th century "extended metaphor," which is what she

claims she ended up writing when she wrote *Housekeeping*; and, third, her ideas about what an extended metaphor can do in terms of envisioning, or re-envisioning, the world. Throughout, then, I'll be excerpting this interview, while also trying to draw connections between the things Robinson says and the novel itself. And when I pose a question, or introduce an idea that's new, I'll highlight it in bold, so that you can orient yourself as you are reading.

My hope is that readers can deepen their encounter with the book and the book's philosophy by getting on terms with it the way that Robinson was on terms with it as she composed it. It's just one approach, and who knows if it will work. The main advantage of this approach is that it may incline us to see Robinson and Ruth as *visionaries*, and to ask what their vision "sees," what it creates. Writes Robinson in an article in the July 2006 issue of *Harper's*:

"It is vision that floods the soul with the sense of holiness, vision of this world."

So, as some of you may know, before setting out to write *Housekeeping*, Robinson earned a Ph.D. in 19th century American literature, in particular that of Herman Melville, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson. Robinson grew fascinated with these writers' use of the extended metaphor. What is an extended metaphor? Let me offer the definition I'm finding most frequently in the books on my shelf and on the web, which is: **a metaphor that dominates or organizes a whole passage of prose, or a whole poem--or even a whole book.** Prominent examples of extended metaphors from the 19th century in America include: the sea in *MOBY DICK*; also the color white in that novel; also "circles" in Emerson's essays (which he writes about in his essay entitled, not surprisingly, "Circles.") As for Emily Dickinson, the other writer Robinson studied in pursuing her Ph.D., a great many of Dickinson's poems are structured around extended metaphors, such as, for example, "I felt a funeral in my brain." This poem starts right off with a metaphor, a "funeral," the implications of which Dickinson explores through to the poem's final stanza. (Those of you who are interested in seeing the poem in its entirety will find it at the end of this document.) The reason I list these examples is

because, A) maybe you've encountered one of them yourself, and B) this was the kind of literature Robinson was studying as she conceived her own extended metaphor(s) in *Housekeeping*. Says Robinson in the *Tin House* interview I mentioned above:

*I was an American literature major in college and I became very interested in the nineteenth century's use of extended metaphors. I felt as if that needed to be explored and that people had stopped using metaphor in that incredibly ambitious way for no particular reason. **I felt that metaphor was no longer being used as a way of envisioning the world.** [Emphasis here is mine.] When I was working on my graduate dissertation people told me if you did critical work you couldn't do creative work. So I would write what to me were extended metaphors—I would write them and then put them away—and when I read them again I realized that they cohered and that they were the basis of a fiction.*

The extended metaphor as a way of envisioning the world—let us keep that idea in mind as we take a look at the contents of Ruth's vision.

The first incidence of Ruth's vision comes, I would suggest, as soon as the book begins, on the third page (in this instance, of the Picador paperback edition.)

"Sometimes in the spring the old lake will return. [...] The earth will brim, the soil will become mud and then silty water, and the grass will stand in chill water to its tips. Our house was at the edge of town on a little hill, so we rarely had more than a black pool in our cellar, with a few skeletal insects skidding around on it. A narrow pond would form in the orchard, water clear as air covering grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches, and on it, slight as an image in an eye, sky, clouds, trees, our hovering faces and our cold hands." (p. 5, *Housekeeping*, Picador Edition)

That image, namely, the world reflected in water, "as slight as an image in an eye," Ruth will return to again and again in the two

hundred pages that follow it. Again and again she'll speak of reflections—and she'll speak of images that are similar to reflections, too. She'll speak of images surfacing from under some kind of coating or patina, like paint; she'll speak of windows; she'll speak of ice, in particular the frozen surface of Fingerbone Lake; she'll speak of steam and the shapes we can draw in it; and at many points in the novel you'll see objects half under water and half above, such as tree branches. In each case, you have a membrane separating one world or realm from another, and in some of those cases, that membrane has a picture on it (or, to be fair, *in* it.) It is from looking obsessively at this membrane--or membranes—that Ruth will develop a wholly articulated vision of, well, existence. (“Existence” is vague; I use it because it doesn't give anything in the book away.) Eventually, these water/ reflection images will become a kind of lens or prism through which Ruth will see the world. Here is another excerpt from that interview with Robinson in the literary journal, *Tin House*:

*Interviewer: You've called the nineteenth century use of metaphors “**real ontology**” and have said that “they don't just signify, they mean.” Can you explain?*

*Robinson: Wallace Stevens provides a good example. He was twelve or thirteen when Melville died and seven when Emily Dickinson died, so he was much closer culturally to them than to us. I use his poem “Of Modern Poetry” to describe how metaphors work in MOBY DICK. It seems to me as if characteristically and pervasively the chapter structures in MOBY DICK are “**poems of the act of the mind**” which reach for a metaphor, encounter the limits of the metaphor, destroy the metaphor, and so forth [...] MOBY DICK makes no argument beyond the display of the fact that **the mind can't set out what it sets to know...***

INTERVIEWER: Say more about Stevens and how he works.

ROBINSON: *Stevens himself has a way of **staying faithful to objects and at the same time freeing them from context so they become transcendent versions of themselves, you know? It's as if the strategy of metaphor is to invest a given thing more fully with itself.***

I know it seems like we're sinking into a morass of literary terms here, but if we stay true to Ruth and remember that *she's* the one telling this story, she's the one working with these images, images she's arriving at out of (creative? metaphysical? emotional? psychological? artistic) need, and interest, we'll stay connected to the story as a human story and so won't sink into that morass.

Let us therefore take Robinson at her word and treat Ruth as *wanting to talk about objects in a way that "stays faithful to them" while "freeing them from context so they become transcendent versions of themselves."* Why would Ruth want to do that? What kind of world will she create if she looks at objects that way—if she indeed transfigures them that way? Try and answer this question with reference to the text.

Here are a couple of sub-questions to this one:

Does this way of viewing Ruth and her story resonate with you? How do you view Ruth's descriptions of the surface of water and other membranes like it?

One thing you might do before meeting to discuss the book is to skim through it a second time and watch for the way Robinson builds those descriptions of water to include more and more of the story's elements as the book proceeds. A kind of synthesis is taking place that will become Ruth's vision.

Question: Again, what is it about Ruth's life that would make her want to re-envision it? And what does that new life end up providing her with that the old could not?

A question about Ruth's tone: Another development you might watch for is the way Ruth's tone changes as the book proceeds. Tone, in literature, is defined as the speaker's or narrator's attitude towards the things he or she is saying. **By the end of the book, Ruth's tone sounds (to me) different than it did at the beginning. Do you feel her tone has changed as well?** If you do, why do you think it's changed? Remember, events change us, but telling stories can change us too. Stories themselves are like bridges spanning deep water—crossing them (telling them) can send us into the wilderness, or can bring us home. And in some lives, “wilderness” and “home” are the same place.

In this last section of study materials you will find **A)** a few more questions about the book, much more briefly stated than the last ones **B)** two Dickinson poems, so you can see short examples of the kind of literature which may have influenced the way Robinson wrote *Housekeeping*, and **C)** definitions of “ontology” and “metaphysics” from the Oxford English Dictionary.

Last questions:

1. What, for you, is the climactic moment in this story?
2. What are the other images Ruth obsesses over? How are these images consistent with Ruth's larger “vision”?
3. What do you make of the long scene near the end of the novel that involves “the children in the woods?” (I'm speaking vaguely here so as not to give anything away.) This scene begins around p. 148 and ends around 153. Every time I read *Housekeeping* I find myself confused as to what is “really” going on in this scene. What do you think?
4. Re-read the last paragraph of the book. It runs on a string of negatives—-and ends up saying something very curious indeed. What do you think it is saying? What is being seen (or not seen?) What is going on (or not going on?) I find the passage confusing. What do you make of it?

5. Do you think this book has a “practical application”? Its landscape, both physical and psychological, is so remote, its characters so eccentric, its language so lyrical, that it may be hard to draw connections between Ruth’s life and your own. Or, maybe you totally disagree. Do you find yourself in this book? Do you find the world-as-you-know-it in this book? How? Or, maybe these are not the questions to be asking of *Housekeeping*.
6. Sylvie is an outcast, and Ruth is becoming an outcast. They have not been sent to this state by others (not really); they have chosen it. Both understand the world expressly from that perspective— from the perspective of the outcast, the outsider. Jesus, too, was an outcast. Perhaps, if you are an observant Christian, you see *Housekeeping* as a New Testament story. And if you are not an observant Christian, and/ or are not inclined to look to the novel in a religious and/ or Christian way, what do you make of Sylvie’s and Ruth’s outsider perspective? So often in modern literature it seems that it’s the outcast whose revelation is the most potentially transfiguring. (Here I think of David Lurie in J. M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, and The Misfit in Flannery O’Connor’s story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”)

B) Poems by Emily Dickinson:

Two poems by Emily Dickinson are included below. They are taken from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Reading Edition, edited by R. W. Franklin, 1998. Like I say, these are here so you can see short, comprehensible examples of the kind of literature Robinson was likely to have been studying as she composed *Housekeeping*. The first poem, “I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,” begins right off with a metaphor, without introducing it as such, and then pursues that metaphor—-a funeral—through until the end of the poem.

#340

I felt a Funeral, in my Brain,
And Mourners to and fro
Kept treading—treading—till it seemed
That Sense was breaking through—

And when they all were seated,
A Service, like a Drum—
Kept beating—beating—till I thought
My Mind was going numb-

And then I heard them lift a Box
And creak across my Soul
With those same Boots of Lead, again,
Then Space—began to toll,

As all the Heavens were a Bell,
And Being, but an Ear,
And I, and Silence, some strange Race
Wrecked, solitary, here—

And then a Plank in Reason, broke,
And I dropped down, and down—
And hit a World, at every plunge,
And Finished knowing—then-

The second poem by Emily Dickinson, “A Bird Came Down the Walk,” works differently than “I felt a Funeral. . .”. It starts with intense attention to a real thing in the world--—in this case, a bird—-and, by watching that bird very closely, opens on to a kind of transfiguration.

#359

A Bird came down the Walk-
He did not know I saw-
He bit an Anglemorm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,

And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass-
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass-

He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around-
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought-
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home-

Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam-
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

C. Definitions of “ontology” and “metaphysics” from the Oxford English Dictionary

metaphysics: the branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including such concepts as being, substance, essence, time, space, cause, and identity; theoretical philosophy as the ultimate science of being and knowing.

Ontology: *Philos.* The science or study of being; that part of metaphysics which relates to the nature or essence of being or existence.

Ontologism n. (*Theol.*) a form of mysticism based on a belief in an immediate cognition of God, **ontological argument:** for the objective existence of God from the idea or essence of God.

Yours,

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