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Marilynne Robinson gives voice to a realm of consciousness beyond the bounds of reason in her novel *Housekeeping*. Possibly concealed by the melancholy but gently methodical tone, boundaries and limits of perception are constantly redefined, [rediscovered](#), and reevaluated. Ruth, as the narrator, leads the reader through the sorrowful events and the mundane details of her childhood and adolescence. She attempts to reconcile her experiences, fragmented and unified, past, present, and future, in order to better understand or substantiate the transient life she leads with her aunt Sylvie. Rather than the wooden structure built by Edmund Foster, the house Ruth eventually comes to inhabit with Sylvie and learn to "keep" is [metaphoric](#). "...it seemed something I had lost might be found in Sylvie's house" (124). The very act of housekeeping invites a radical revision of fundamental concepts like time, memory, and meaning.

Robinson delights in an intense "undifferentiated attentiveness to all the details" (82). The ordinary is given added significance and, as a result, the [pace](#) of the novel is slowed considerably. While supplying a layer of added realism, these mundane, fragmentary domestic details serve as an important thematic strategy to Robinson. The reader's

attention becomes focussed on the passing of each moment in time. Ruth is initially frustrated with the seeming discontinuity of her own existence and tries to assign some order to it. "What are all these fragments for if not to be knit up finally?" (92). She yearns for a time when there "would be a general reclaiming" of the various seemingly meaningless fragments of human existence, a moment when "time...

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...ould become unnecessary and meaningless "if only the darkness", like nothingness, "could be perfect and permanent" (116). Nothingness does preclude individual identity of any sort, however. Surrendering completely to nothingness would negate any possibility of authentic intimate human relations: the one source of meaning and happiness to Sylvie.

The house Sylvie attempts to "keep" must accommodate change including the peace and threat implied by nothingness. "A house should be built to float cloud high, if need be...A house should have a compass and a keel" (184). Rather than being seduced by the ultimate and final separation of nothingness, Ruth learns (as a transient) that housekeeping can be an expansive and inclusive method of engaging and interpreting the world.

Work Cited:

Robinson, Marilynne. Housekeeping. New York: Bantam Books, 1982.

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