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The Missing Mother: How Ruth and Lucille of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* Develop Identities After the Abandonment of Their Mother

Family helps form identities. Whether people like to believe it or not, a huge part of how people define themselves comes from how they are raised and the relationships they form with family members. One can define herself by focusing on how she is unlike relatives, but even in doing this, she is using family as a framework for herself. While any relative may have an effect on a person's life, it is usually the parents, or guardians, that create the most lasting effect. These are the people that spend the most time with children and it is through observation and interaction with guardians that children learn how to behave. But what if a child never gets to develop a full relationship with any sort of parent? How would a child in such a situation learn to identify oneself if there are no stable figures to relate to? It is this dilemma that arises in Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Housekeeping*. The book tells the story of two sisters, Lucille and Ruth, who lose their mother at a young age, and with no father figure around they are passed around through a series of other guardians: all of which are female. It is clear through the text, which is narrated by Ruth, that the girls struggle to connect with a mother figure which is not present. During this search the girls grow apart as they struggle to find themselves. After a series of abandonment, Ruth and Lucille of Robinson's *Housekeeping* find their own identities through the mother-daughter relationships they form and the homes that they connect with.

Mother/daughter relationships are often overlooked in literature. Due to Freud's oedipal complex, people often focus on relationships dealing with mother/son or father/daughter, but

much is to be said about the way that a girl learns from her closest model in society. This idea is often brought up when texts are read through a feminist perspective.

The most complex form of relationship in feminist literature, however, seems to be the mother/daughter relationship, for that is the primary relationship for many girls.

Adrienne Rich notes that mother-and-daughter existed long before cultural constructs of sisterhood did, and that the mother/daughter relationship at various times both blown out of proportion and not given enough attention, 'is the great unwritten story'. She further notes that 'the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy...there is no presently enduring recognition of mother-daughter passion and rapture. (Trites 100)

Although the focus of mother/daughter relationships is often brought up by feminists to prove the strength of female characters, there is more to it than that. As this passage acknowledges, there is often a strong bond formed between mothers and daughters and the loss of one can have traumatic effects. In some of the earliest literature found in the Near East "the nature of the bond between mother and daughter is pictured as incomparably intense" (Ochshorn 5). This is evidence that mother/daughter relationships have substance outside of the feminism movement. Together, mothers and daughters connect with each other in a way that has powerful effects on each of their identities.

It is clear that mother/daughter relationships in themselves are important to the development of young girls. A mother is someone who is thought to act as a role model for her children, but especially for her daughter(s). Being of the same gender, girls often look to their mothers to determine the proper way to act according to societal standards. Children, in general, also expect to be nurtured by parents and mothers usually take this role most seriously. Because

of this, the slightest mistake or unpopular decision made by the parent toward the child can leave a lasting impact. It seems then obvious that if a parent can be capable of such damage while still there for a child, the loss of a parent would have traumatic results. This is the state in which readers discover Ruth and Lucille in Robinson's *Housekeeping*. "Even in mother-child relationships that are not as abruptly severed as Ruth's, we recognize a primary human pattern, feelings of regret and abandonment that inevitably accompany the individual over the course of emotional development" (Ravits 647). At a young, impressionable age, Ruth and her sister are forced to face the world without the aid of a mother by their sides. Naturally the two girls struggle to identify with a strong motherly character and thus have a harder time finding themselves. Throughout the text they each search for a strong mother figure, which can be seen as a metaphor for finding their own identities to attach with (Trites 108). Through Ruth's narration, the reader sees how each of the sisters were effected by abandonment and how they develop because of it.

Ruth opens *Housekeeping* by introducing herself as well as her sister, and listing the series of guardians that helped raise them. "My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher" (3). Right away Ruth informs the reader of all of the people who have played a part in raising her and all but the last one has left her in some way. It is also significant to recognize that this list that Ruth so simply provides does not contain her true mother, who may have been guilty of the biggest abandonment. Helen, Ruth and Lucille's real mother, left her daughters with their grandmother and left to commit suicide. Ruth remarks on this event towards the end of the first chapter.

She put our suitcases in the screened porch, which was populated by a cat and a matronly washing machine, and told us to wait quietly. Then she went back to the car and drove north almost to Tyler, where she sailed in Bernice's Ford from the top of a cliff named Whiskey Rock into the blackest depth of the lake. (22)

Ruth is able to talk about such an event with no emotion, and her passive attitude continues throughout the novel. It is clear that Ruth has suffered from the lack of stable parenting in her life and the continual abandonment has left her empty and unsure of her own identity.

It is also worthy to point out that in the first chapter, Ruth spends a great deal of time describing the death of her grandfather, Edmond Foster, and how it affected his family. Although the focus of this paper is to discuss the mother/daughter connection, the lack of male characters is what leads one to discover such an emphasis on the relationships between female characters: "...for the women of the novel, the absence of husbands and fathers is the prerequisite for their own development...Her [Helen's] death allows a range of female relations to develop, all prompted by the girls' need of a mother" (Aldrich 309). With the men aside, the mother figure is given sole power and all the daughters in the story recognize this. After Foster's death, his daughters place more focus on their mother and give her the attention that they had not prior to that. "After their father's death, the girls hovered around her, watched everything she did, followed her through the house, got in her way" (10). With the father no longer present, the girls start to pay more attention to their mother which appears to have been missing beforehand. Sylvia is pleased to be able to have this new relationship with her daughters and works to foster it. "Edmond Foster's death brings a new intimacy between Sylvia and her daughters, as if finally, without the father, the daughters recover their mother" (Aldrich 309). Ruth takes the

time to thoroughly discuss these scenes, as she imagines them (since she had not yet been born), because it provides more insight into the important role of motherhood.

For the first part of the book, Ruth and Lucille rely on each other for everything—everything they do they do, together. Ruth, even though she is the older sibling, lets Lucille make decisions and talk for her. The two girls are each other's constant support while they suffer through constant abandonment, starting with their mother, then grandmother, and ending with Nona and Lily. It seems fitting that the sisters are so close with each other in that they possess almost completely opposing personalities. While Ruth has trouble thinking for herself and hardly ever talks, Lucille cannot hold in anything and vocalizes all of her opinions without hesitation. Even Ruth acknowledges that she identifies the two of them as one during the time she and Lucille were still close: "in recollection I feel no reluctance to speak of Lucille and myself almost as a single consciousness..." (98). Ruth and Lucille's extreme personalities seem to meet in the middle to form one average individual. They use this family support with each other to survive through the lack of a mother.

After Helen's death, Ruth and Lucille do not seem to bother connecting with their grandmother who was left to raise them. At first it seems odd since Sylvia is the most traditional and reliable mother figure that they receive; however, even at a young age, they see Sylvia as just a temporary guardian. Ruth comments on how she watched her grandmother age quickly and was aware that she was old (26). It could be because Ruth and Lucille were aware that they would soon lose their grandmother that they did not bother making an effort to become too attached. After her passing, Nona and Lily step in to raise the girls, and once again Ruth and Lucille do not bother to form relationships with their guardians. Nona and Lily made it very clear that at their age they had no intentions of raising two children and put all of their energy

into finding Sylvie so that they could pass off the responsibility (39). Already having been abandoned by their mother, it is not unusual that Ruth and Lucille are hesitant to make connections with those that appear to be preparing for a similar action.

When Sylvie announces that she will return to Fingerbone and take over as guardian, a new hope arises in Ruth and Lucille that is not present before. The idea that Sylvie may be more like their own mother (given that they are sisters) makes the two girls eager to meet their aunt in anticipation that she might bring with her a sense of permanence.

So Lucille and I began to anticipate the appearance of our mother's sister with all the guilty hope that swelled our guardians' tawny bosoms. She would be our mother's age, and might amaze us with her resemblance to our mother. She would have grown up with our mother in this very house, and in the care of our grandmother... We began to hope, if unawares, that a substantial restitution was about to be made. (41)

It is notable that the reason why Ruth and Lucille are eager to meet their aunt is because they hope to find similarities with their mother. Despite the fact that their mother has already abandoned them, they see Sylvie as a way of replacing her in the closest way possible. This common expectation between the two sisters is also what starts to deteriorate their bond as, disappointed in Sylvie, they separate to find their own identities.

Sylvie's arrival at Fingerbone is the start of Ruth and Lucille's detachment from each other. Their opposing personalities that at the beginning of the text held them together become too strong and work against them. Ruth sees Sylvie as being just like her own mother, which is what the girls describe as wanting. In fact, the similarities between Sylvie and Helen become so strong that Ruth begins to have trouble distinguishing between the two: "...Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother, and then to displace it" (53). Because Ruth sees Sylvie in a similar

way that she had expected to, it does not seem to disrupt her lifestyle and she remains the same passive character. However, Lucille shows resistance towards being connected with Sylvie in any way.

Shortly after Sylvie arrives there is a tremendous rainstorm that floods even the Foster house up on the hill. The four day storm kept the family in their house on the second floor since the ground level was flooded. Lucille becomes agitated by the fact that she has been cut off from the town and begs with Sylvie that they venture out to find other people to socialize with. Sylvie acknowledges Lucille's loneliness, but with no desire to leave, she simply starts to tell the girls about a woman she knew who also suffered from loneliness, but who couldn't solve the problem with traditional techniques such as family. In telling this story she dismisses Lucille's problem and teaches of unconventional gender roles.

...[Sylvie] tells stories of lonely, vagrant women: stories that reject traditional expectations about the female narrative and offer Ruthie different ways of being female... The woman 'who was so lonely she married an old man with a limp and had four children in five years, and none of it helped at all' affirms, too, that the traditional female role—marriage, motherhood—fails to satisfy all women. (Ryan 340)

In discussing her own preferences through this story, Sylvie confirms the differences between herself and Lucille, while offering examples of other women who are not satisfied with female roles in society.

The story which Sylvie shares during the flood is also significant in that it brings to light another issue for Ruth and Lucille that they had never considered before. Sylvie ends her discussion with the mention of probate court and the idea that children can be taken away from unfit parenting. This was an idea that the two girls had never heard of before and it shocked



them. “That was the first Lucille or I had heard of the interest of the state in the well-being of children, and we were alarmed...not til then did we dream that *we* might be taken from *her*”

(68). Ruth and Lucille had accepted the fact that Sylvia might abandon them (since she was so similar to their mother) but it had never occurred to the girls that they could actually be the ones who do the abandoning. At this point Ruth imagines someone taking her from Sylvie and envisions her aunt’s distress at such a situation:

...an old man in a black robe would step from behind a tree and take me by the hand—  
Sylvie too stricken to weep and I too startled to resist. Such a separation, I imagined,  
could indeed lead to loneliness intense enough to make one conspicuous in bus  
stations...Sylvie, at that moment, would hardly be noticed in a bus station. (68)

Early in their relationship Ruth is starting to sympathize with Sylvie. Abandonment is something that Ruth is already too familiar with at such a young age and she does not want to put her aunt in that kind of position. Meanwhile, for Lucille the story opens up opportunities for her to rationalize her own abandonment later in life.

As Ruth finds similarities between herself and Sylvie, Lucille works to locate all of the differences, as a way to separate herself from her unstable aunt. Lucille sees her mother and Sylvie are different from the women that she meets in society and thus does not want to connect with them. Before Sylvie arrives, Ruth and Lucille have an argument over what color hair their aunt will have. “Lucille and I argued about whether her hair would be brown or red. Lucille would say, ‘I know it’ll be brown like Mother’s,’ and I’d reply, ‘Hers wasn’t brown. It was red’” (43). Because Lucille has red hair, she insists that both Helen and Sylvie must be brunettes in order to create even the slightest separation. This subtle denial of resemblance is only the beginning of how Lucille detaches herself from her mother and Sylvie.

As Lucille gets older, she creates a completely different image of her mother than Ruth remembers. Rather than admitting to the Sylvie-like mother that Ruth recalls, Lucille decides to remember Helen as woman that Lucille would want to identify with.

Lucille's mother was orderly, vigorous, and sensible, a widow (more than I ever knew or she could prove) who was killed in an accident. *My mother presided over a life so strictly simple and circumscribed that it could not have made any significant demands on her attention. She tended us with a gentle indifference that made me feel she would have liked to have been even more alone—she was the abandoner, and not the one abandoned.*  
(109)

By creating a completely new mother for herself, Lucille forms a person for her to identify with, even if it is only fictional at this point (Aldrich 312). Ruth, however, has a more real memory of her mom which admits to her faults and allows Ruth to be the victim of abandonment.

The differences between Ruth and Lucille's perceptions of their mother show that the girls are developing different perceptions of their own identities. While Lucille works to construct a mother like the ones she associates with in society, Ruth finds that she can relate more to the reality of her actual mother.

Lucille's identity develops as a result of her recognition of difference, specifically the way Sylvie differs from other girls' mothers, most importantly Rosette Browne's mother...Lucille defines herself by excluding Sylvie, and eventually her sister, and functions within the given structure of social and sexual roles and relations. (Aldrich 312)

The results of her mother's abandonment left Lucille looking to redefine the way she turns out. She does not wish to identify with a mother who left her and killed herself in despair—and instead works to be everything that her mother, and Sylvie, are not.

Evidence all throughout the text shows how Ruth and Lucille begin to drift apart. However, it appears to be during a hike the girls go on, which turns into an overnight event, that marks the major turning point in their relationship. While spending the night on the side of lake, Lucille insists on building a shelter for them to sleep in but after it collapses, Ruth finds comfort in sitting in the open darkness while Lucille tries to make noise in order to ward off animals. This scene perfectly displays the way that the girls have taken to two different worlds—one of society and one of nature.

Lucille, a traditional homemaker, insists on building a stronghold to enclose and protect them against intruders and the dark...Ruth, on the other hand, accepts the shelter's collapse and finds the subsequent overrunning of her human 'boundaries' exhilarating and revelatory...Ruth and Lucille return home confirmed in their different loyalties.

(Aldrich 313)

Although the girls never discuss the experience of that night, the walk back to their house the next day is almost completely in silence. Both of the girls recognize that their separation is upon them—they have become two independent individuals. They no longer cling to the single identity as they did in the beginning of the book.

Even after the camping event, Lucille and Ruth stay together at home though their sisterhood is strained. Lucille fights with Ruth and almost seems annoyed that she resists society the way that she does. The conflict continues until one night when Lucille leaves the house and goes to live with her Home Economics teacher, who adopts her after Lucille describes the

problems she has at her home (140). Such a teacher seems the obvious choice for Lucille to pick to be her mother since she teaches the proper procedure for household chores, thus making her a traditional woman by societal standards. Lucille takes it upon herself to decide that her current living standards were unfit and needed to be fixed (rather than having a court do it for her).

By leaving the house and taking on a new mother, Lucille becomes the abandoner of both Ruth and Sylvie, making Lucille more like her mother than she would ever admit. Even though the girls had grown apart, Ruth was not quite prepared for her sister to leave completely. “It surprised me that Lucille left so abruptly” (140). Yet again Ruth has been abandoned, and this time it was by the one person she had allowed herself to get close to since Helen’s death. With Lucille gone, Ruth is left vulnerable and more ready to recognize Sylvie as her mother figure (Ravits 652).

Ruth finds similarities between herself, Sylvie and Helen from the beginning of the book on. Unlike Lucille, who sought to recreate her mother with someone completely different, Ruth simply wants to replace her (Aldrich 312). While the abandonment of Helen damaged Ruth, she manages to sympathize with her mother in a sense by admitting to their parallel personalities. Sylvie is seen as a bridge between Ruth and her mother, containing elements of both figures, making her an obvious mother figure for Ruth.

Ruth, because she has refound her mother in Sylvie and experiences no real differences with Sylvie, neither searches for various substitutes for her mother’s body, nor feels the absence of her original mother, and does not need the compensation the symbolic order offers, as Lucille does. (Aldrich 311)

It is because Ruth already sees Sylvie as a suitable mother replacement that she does not feel the need to follow Lucille anymore. However, it is the bond between the sisters that had kept Ruth from ever letting herself get too close with Sylvie.

While Lucille is around, Ruth starts to let a distance build between them, but that is as far as their separation goes. It is important to remember that at this point Lucille is the only stable relationship that Ruth has had throughout her life. After Lucille leaves Ruth is left without anybody—abandoned by both mother and sister. In need of forming a new connection Ruth finally agrees to go with Sylvie to visit an abandoned house that she has discovered. She offers to take Ruth there before Lucille's disappearance but Ruth turns down the offer; however, after Lucille is out of the picture, it is Ruth who asks Sylvie to take her on the trip (142). During this outing Ruth finalizes her connection with Sylvie and adopts her as a mother figure.

On the morning of the adventure, Ruth blatantly states not only to her resemblance of Sylvie, but to Sylvie's likeness of Helen. "We were the same. She could as well be my mother. I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child" (145). From the start of the trip, Ruth makes a point to connect herself, Helen, and Sylvie by announcing that they are all the same. This is the first step to her accepting an identity, and at the cabin Sylvie leads Ruth to her final state of her recovery.

Sylvie takes Ruth across the lake to show her an abandoned cabin, but shortly after they arrive, Sylvie disappears. "Sylvie was gone. She had left without a word, or a sound" (153). Ruth finds herself deserted in the woods, abandoned yet again. With nowhere to go and with hope that Sylvie will return, Ruth remains at the house alone with her thoughts. After some time of working through frustration and stress, Ruth becomes satisfied with her loneliness. "Because, once alone, it is impossible to believe that one could ever have been otherwise. Loneliness is an

absolute discovery” (157). By being forced to deal with this one last case of abandonment, Ruth is able to confront her issues by herself until she is able to find comfort in her solitude—just as Sylvie has described throughout the text.

Once Ruth has learned to survive through all abandonment and appreciate the idea of being on her own, Sylvie returns. In leading Ruth to this house and abandoning her, Sylvie creates the opportunity for Ruth to resolve her inner crisis (Ravits 659). As soon as Sylvie sees that Ruth has found peace and is ready to move on, Sylvie is able to step back into the scene and take on the role of mother by holding Ruth and offering her a coat for the boat ride back. Ruth takes notice of Sylvie’s eagerness to care for her: “I could feel the pleasure she took in my dependency...” (161). This implies that Sylvie might have the desire for the same connection that Ruth needs. Just as Ruth wants to see Sylvie as a mother, Sylvie wants to be able to provide that support, even if in unconventional ways.

On the trip back to Fingerbone, Ruth undergoes a rebirth while lying in the damp bottom of the boat with Sylvie above her rowing (162). It is in this moment that Ruth fully accepts Sylvie as a mother figure. It is the experience by the cabin that allows Ruth to take hold of the connection she has with Sylvie who works to replace the former bonds Ruth had relied on. Ruth, who clung to Lucille the majority of the story, is set free to acknowledge her own identity through her union with Sylvie: “...[Ruth] is an individual standing, not alone, but together, with an aunt who is also mother and sister, and with whom she affirms bonds of family” (Ryan 338). With Sylvie, Ruth is able to morph into her own identity while reaffirming her connection with her family. Ruth knows that the bond she creates with Sylvie is not one-sided, and when the sheriff threatens to take Ruth away after the town hears of the unconventional trip she states:

“Sylvie did not want to lose me” (195). Sylvie and Ruth become a single unit, brought together by family and likenesses.

While Ruth admits to Sylvie as a mother figure while out on the boat, it is later in the orchard that Ruth is able to reach her full connection with her aunt. While outside with a bonfire of accumulated magazines and newspapers, Ruth decides to run off into the darkness of the orchard. Since it is usually Sylvie who wanders off in the dark, this act of role reversal allows Ruth to get a better understanding of her aunt and teaches her something about herself. “I learned an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort” (204). Because Ruth is able to relate so well with her aunt, Ruth no longer considers Sylvie to be insane, and instead trusts her more. When it looks as though Ruth and Sylvie are going to be separated by the court, it seems the obvious choice to both of them to abandon the family house and leave Fingerbone together.

Although Ruth has avoided any sense of abandonment throughout the text, she can rationalize leaving the house in order to stay with Sylvie. “By convention, abandonment suggests suffering, nostalgia, a subjection to the past, but for Sylvie and Ruth, abandonment becomes a way of life, the means to overcome subjection to the past” (Aldrich 309). As long as she and Sylvie are able to stay together, Ruth is able to abandon her town. Family plays a huge role in Ruth’s life in that it is one of the key elements in identity. “There is remembrance, and communion, altogether human and unhallowed. For families will not be broken” (194). At that moment in her life Sylvie was the prime figure in Ruth’s family and because of this she leaves with her aunt. However, at the end of the text, years later, Ruth still thinks of Lucille and imagines about her life and what it would be like if the two sisters were reunited (Ravits 666).

While neither of the girls are going out of the way to see each other, the acknowledgement of Lucille and curiosity that Ruth possesses proves that the family has not completely separated.

Ruth and Lucille both find different ways to deal with the abandonment of their mother which leads them to finding identity through different mother figures. Lucille looks to society to form the ideal mother figure and abandons all family roots in order to fit in. Ruth remains true to her family roots and finds Sylvie to replace Helen since they appear similar in nature and share many of Ruth's own personality traits. The fact that both girls, who were very close to each other, have such different reactions to their mother's death may have to do with how well they knew Helen before her death.

But if she [the mother] is dead or absent, the good mother can remain an ideal without her presence disrupting or preventing the necessary drama of the novel. If the mother is to present during her daughter's maturation, the mother must be flawed in some way, so that instead of preventing her daughter's trials, she contributes to them. The nurturing that we usually associate with motherhood, then seems to have to be withdrawn or denied in order to goad the daughter into self-assertion and maturation. (MacDonald 58)

Lucille, the younger daughter, may not have remembered enough of her mother to make a lasting impact. Distraught by the loss she might have been able to turn her mother into an ideal character for her to model. She chose to look towards society for such a character and as a result turned her back on her actual family when her identity was found elsewhere. Ruth, on the other hand, recognized her mother's faults and was haunted by them. However, as she found herself to have similar traits, she could not help but feel the need to connect with Helen. Sylvie, a mirror to both the mother and daughter, steps in to be a proper replacement, providing Ruth with a living guardian to identify with.



Discovering identity is a struggle that many young girls go through as they grow, and without any prominent guardians to provide examples, this struggle is only magnified. Missing their mother to act as a model, Ruth and Lucille, of Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, find their own identities by finding new mother figures to connect with. Despite the different journeys the girls undertake, by the end of the novel they both seem to have progressed to a point where they each appear comfortable. There is no ending to the quest for identity, as many adults are still altering their own; however, in finding new mother figures, the sisters are able to learn more about themselves and be content with what they learn. Described as fragile, freshly abandoned children in the beginning of the story, readers discover that by the end of the novel Ruth and Lucille are portrayed as much more complete characters and stronger individuals.

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