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## Fluidity and Solidity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

Engelska  
C-uppsats

Termin: Vårterminen 2006  
Handledare: Maria Holmgren Troy

## C-paper Abstract

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The purpose of this essay is to show that fluidity and solidity constitute a central tension on all levels in *Housekeeping*, and how this tension leads to a choice of either a fluid or a solid lifestyle and view of the world. I focus on fluidity and solidity in gender roles, in memories, in dreams, in nature, and in different perceptions of reality. By taking a closer look at Ruth's first-person narration (seeing fluidity as not resisting deformation, while solidity resists deformation), we find that the characters in *Housekeeping* have fluid and solid traits, but that there is no reality that allows mixed manifestations of these. This results in repression of either fluidity or solidity, which creates tension and feelings of loss. Ruth chooses a fluid lifestyle, thus her memories and dreams become mixed with her present, and this also leads her to become a transient, outside gender roles and traditional small town society. Transience in this novel questions all distinctions conventionally made between dream and reality; male and female. In conclusion, this essay highlights how tension between fluidity and solidity is generated on all levels in *Housekeeping*, and how this leads to either fluid or solid lifestyles since the characters follow a cultural code that dictates a choice between them.

## Fluidity and Solidity in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

In Marilynne Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping* (*H*) her protagonist Ruth tells her life's story and desires. Her tale is set in the 1950s in Fingerbone, a small town in the northwest of America. She searches for something she has lost; she is uncertain of what, but she feels incomplete and misplaced without it. Her narration begins with statements of solid facts on the first page. Then she uses the same plain way to describe uncertainties, like her grandparents' relationship, but as she develops toward a fluid less concrete way of viewing reality, the narration of the text follows her change, and its style becomes fluid and dreamlike.

In my exploration of *Housekeeping*, I will focus on fluidity and solidity, and I will use the term fluidity to describe that which "share[s] the properties of not resisting deformation and the ability to flow" ("Fluid"), as opposed to solidity, which is "a phase of matter characterized by resistance to deformation" ("Solid"). Characters with fluid attributes are often transients. Transiency, as such, means to stay only for a brief time, and it denotes that endings and death are inevitable, as well as freedom from boundaries. In *Housekeeping*, people who mostly have fluid traits do not stay within the boundaries of solid conventional patterns of behavior, or within solid dwellings. In contrast, the characters who mostly have solid traits try to maintain what is considered ordinary and normal; hence they either stay unchanged in a solid environment, or they continually adapt and change in order to avoid "deformation" of solid patterns. All characters in *Housekeeping* contain traits that are connected to fluidity as well as other traits that are connected to solidity, but there is no reality that allows them to express both their fluid and their solid traits. Hence a painful choice, which creates tension, must be made by the characters. In my essay I will suggest that fluidity and solidity constitute a central tension on all levels in Robinson's novel, and show how this tension leads to a choice of either a fluid or solid lifestyle and view of the world. My focus will be on fluidity and solidity in gender roles, in memories, in dreams, in nature, and in different perceptions of reality.

The common people in Fingerbone, the small town where Ruth grows up, live according to solid traditional 1950s gender roles. This means that the nuclear family is the norm. The men should be rational, and strong both physically and psychically, they should also be their family's provider. Women, on the other hand, are expected to take care of their home and family, while being dependent on their men's capability to provide for their family (Tyson 83-88).

Ruth's and Lucille's aunt Sylvie has a fluid unawareness of these gender roles, which reveals both good and bad sides with the maintenance of this system, and this creates tension. However, already before Sylvie is introduced in *Housekeeping*, Ruth tells the readers how her grandparents fail to act according to solid traditional norms. Ruth's grandfather Edmund fails because he only has little "stability and common sense" (H 10). Not only is he a painter, and a dreamer, he also follows his dream and moves to the mountains. Edmund takes a train and ends up on a hill in Fingerbone where he builds a house for Sylvia who he marries. Sylvia acts according to solid conventions (even after her husband's death) in her housekeeping and her taking care of Ruth and Lucille "to the time of her death [...] [when] the properties [...] all these things would suddenly become liquid" (H 29). But Ruth describes other traits that Sylvia has, which actually distinguishes her from the traditional women. Sylvia is rational since she sees "life as a road down which one travelled" (H 9), which is a linear masculine way of thinking (Tyson 92). And in Ruth's account Sylvia also differs from the traditional women since she is mentally strong. She "had never really wished to feel married [...] she loved him [Edmund] best, as a soul all unaccompanied, like her own" (H 17). The result of Sylvia's independence is that her beloved daughters leave her when they grow up. She does not see the connection between her own, and her daughters' independences, but according to Ruth she misses their solid "dear ordinary" (H 15) when they are gone.

Differently from Ruth's grandparents, Sylvie not only fails to act according to a few social conventions, she does not follow rules at all. The transient Sylvie cannot stay within any solid framework since her duration is never long anywhere. Ruth and Lucille, who spend part of their childhood within the framework of traditional gender roles, become confused by Sylvie's fluid way of living. At first, both girls feel insecure and they believe that Sylvie could leave them at any moment since she does not settle, and unpack her belongings.

In contrast to Sylvie, Lucille shares community's solid values, and therefore "hated everything that had to do with transience" (H 103). Lucille tries to make both Sylvie and Ruth change their transient behaviour so their family would be tolerated by the conventional people in Fingerbone. Ruth finds that Lucille "saw in everything its potential for individual change" (H 93). Since Lucille has solid traits, she easily adapts to society's traditional pattern in Fingerbone. But Lucille eventually gives up concerning Ruth and Sylvie, and she admits that "you can't help the way you are". Lucille points out that she, on the other hand, is "not like that" and "do[es]n't have to" (H 130) change in order to fit within solid society. Ruth notices that Lucille grows up into "a small woman" (H 97), and she is outgoing like the ordinary girls in Fingerbone. Ruth herself only grows tall and introverted, and she is "increasingly struck by

Lucille's ability to look the way one was supposed to look" (*H* 121). The differences between the girls are sources for tension, since their inner dominating fluidity or solidity pulls them in opposite directions from each other, and makes them interested in different things. This is evident when Lucille tells Ruth that they "need other friends" (*H* 130), and Ruth's response is the thought that she "had never really had any use for friends or conventional amusements" (*H* 130). This shows that Lucille wants to be a part of solid society, while Ruth rather stays free from demanding bonds with the people from Fingerbone. And while Ruth spends much time "looking out of windows" (*H* 133), instead of wondering what the people from Fingerbone thinks about her, "Lucille has mastered appearances—or they have mastered her, since she believes them to be reality" (Geyh 111). Lucille bases her appearance on traditional patterns in Fingerbone, and since it is principally the women in *Housekeeping* who protect and maintain these solid traditions, it is the women's approval that is Lucille's primary concern, and "through whose eyes she continually imagined she saw [Sylvie and Ruth]" (*H* 103). As Paula E Geyh points out, "women can maintain their places within patriarchal systems even in his absence" (108). As an example Ruth describes that when the women in Fingerbone "feel that my social graces were eroding away" (*H* 183), they use "gestures and attitudes of Christian benevolence" (*H* 182) in their efforts to rescue Ruth from going outside the traditional framework. Religion is very important to the society in Fingerbone, and since this is a town with many churches, these compete to show that their special view is preferable to all others. The one way the churches can show their superiority in, is "in terms of good works. And the obligation to perform these works rested squarely with the women, since salvation was universally considered to be much more becoming in women than men" (*H* 183); so the women from Fingerbone actually feel obliged by their religion to help Ruth, it is not only their personal concern that urges them to visit her.

The realization of how solidly traditional gender roles are integrated in Fingerbone is actually intensified because the men stay in the periphery in *Housekeeping*. Elisabeth A. Meese claims that male absence permits readers "to explore the idea of 'woman' and gender roles in essentially female terms" (59). I can agree with Meese that the idea of woman is explored in *Housekeeping*, but it should also be considered that some of the most tension-filled turning-points in Ruth's narration do include men: for instance, Ruth's grandfather "who brought them here [to Fingerbone]" (*H* 3); the principal in school who wants "a change of attitude" (*H* 135), which divides Ruth and Lucille; and the sheriff, whose attempt to keep Ruth away from turning into a transient only encourages her to try the fluid path and become a drifter with Sylvie. Moreover, transients like Sylvie and Ruth are mostly fluid and

inconsistent. They cannot be defined within solid frames such as “gender roles”. They are neither bothered with conventional housekeeping (since they do not value material preservation), nor are they showing interest in anything connected to sexuality. Lucille even tells Sylvie that “I don’t think you’ve ever had a husband” (*H* 102), because Sylvie does not show interest in her matrimonial alliance with this man. Ruth identifies herself both psychically and physically with Sylvie. They are “long and narrow” (*H* 131), and when Ruth compares how she and Lucille grow from children into adults she notes that while Lucille “became a small woman, I became a towering child” (*H* 97). So Ruth does not describe herself physically as a woman. I also disagree with Meese’s statement that “only Sylvie, the itinerant drifter with no children of her own, is able to ‘mother’, to make a home, and to live out an autonomous female identity” (59). Since Sylvie’s and Ruth’s transiency means that they only stay briefly wherever they are, they cannot be contained within the parameter of gender. I believe that Phyllis Lassner is closer to the truth than Meese concerning Sylvie’s and Ruth’s relation. Lassner writes that “aunt and niece [...] form a new model [...] they drift away from the social pressures of family desire” (56). This “new model” is androgynous, since Sylvie’s and Ruth’s fluidity releases them from gender.

Ruth’s narration mainly consists of her memories, and her reconstructions of the past. Memories are fluid and uncertain, but evoke solid images within the characters that, as Ruth describes them, are “by their nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary” (*H* 53). The past is a solidified collection of memories that each character has to define in order to give stability and meaning to their present. In a different context, Nicola King describes two main approaches to how recollection of memory works that are found in Freud:

One model, illustrated by Freud by means of an analogy with archaeological excavation, assumes that the past still exists ‘somewhere’, waiting to be rediscovered by the remembering subject, uncontaminated by subsequent experience and time’s attrition. The other imagines the process of memory as one of continuous revision or ‘retranslation’, reworking memory-traces in the light of later knowledge and experience.

(4)

The first model, which King also calls “Freud’s digging metaphor” (13), is connected to solidity since it claims that it is possible to restore repressed memories fully. But one has to use subjective interpretations in order to make sense of these memories and be able to draw conclusions from them. This results in a fluid mixture between solid preserved memories and

fluid changeable interpretations. The other approach is completely fluid, and it supports the belief that our memories of the past as well as their meaning change continually depending on what we experience later in life.

In *Housekeeping*, the characters' memories differ firstly because their mnemonic past (the original content of their memories) already is fully or partly based on their individual perceptions, and secondly because the way they handle and recreate their repressed memories is based on the function their past has to them in their present situation. As King notes, "the models outlined above have cultural resonance: [...] the functioning of memory underpin the ways in which a culture positions itself in relation to the past [...] the ways in which we construct the very means and possibility of remembering" (4-5). In Robinson's novel, these cultures can be divided into groups of characters who belong to the transient fluid culture, or to the solid conventional culture. Ruth's perception of reality is connected to fluidity, while Lucille's perception is connected to solidity. These differences make the sisters position themselves differently in relation to their memories, as well as make them remember different things.

Ruth's fluid position "in relation to the past" makes her able to turn her memories into part of her past only when she truly accepts her interpretations and conclusions of them. Therefore Ruth's story consists of a mixture of recollected ambiguous memories and memory sections that she accepts as her true past. She shares memories that concern her and her sister Lucille's childhood adventures as if she tells facts, which shows that these memories are truly part of her past. Other memories, like those fragments Ruth has of her dead mother, are evoked with uncertainties included. She shows hesitation about what these memories mean through using expressions like "so it seemed" and "perhaps" (*H* 122). Ruth does not spell out what these memories tell, since she is still working through these, in order to make them a comprehensible part of her past. When she describes the winter after her grandmother's death, while she and her sister are looked after by their great aunts, she reveals how a fluid perspective of life is introduced to, and affects hers and her sister's lives. This happens when their transient aunt Sylvie becomes their guardian instead of their solid great aunts, and as Geyh writes "the *settled* and the *transient* are the two subject positions open to the two young girls" (104). A new fluid reality is revealed to the girls, as well as a gateway to reconciling themselves with the past. Sylvie is not only the first adult in the girls' life who willingly talks with them about their dead mother Helen, She also reminds Ruth of her mother, and stimulates her imagination and recollection of memories.

The reason why the sisters are in the care of their grandmother, in the first place, is because it is at her house their mother leaves her children right before she commits suicide. For a long time Ruth becomes trapped in the past because of this traumatic loss. Her confidence in her mother's return, or an explanation of her action, is to Ruth like "the movement in the air before the wind comes" (*H* 121), and this confidence keeps her in constant tension. Meanwhile, she finds comfort in believing that "the first event is known to have been an expulsion, and the last [...] a reconciliation and return" (*H* 192). This belief shows that she has a fluid, transient perspective of time, since she believes in movement from "expulsion" to "return" instead of consistency. The transient perspective of time makes her feel like she just "got used to [...] one moment [when] expelled into the next" (*H* 166). The present becomes part of the past before her eyes as she concentrates on watching it, searching for clues to her final "reconciliation and return". To escape this destructive pattern of behaviour, Ruth starts to search for clues to her future in the past times, and she thinks that "memory pulls us forward" (*H* 192). This means that her perception of reality would change if she managed to recreate memories of a past that she can reconcile herself with. In contrast, her sister's need for solidity urges her to quickly recreate a background, which only consists of a thin, but seemingly solid surface. Her memories of Helen mostly consist of fantasies that respond to her image of how a mother should be: "orderly, vigorous and sensible" (*H* 109), instead of the real woman who sits "smoking and reading [...] and gaze[s] into the center of the room" (*H* 110). She uses her fragile image of her mother as a starting point for her creation of a respectable life (according to traditional norms). Tension is created between the sisters as a consequence of their different goals with remembering their mother, and their different ways to reconcile themselves with the past, so they drift apart. Another result of the sisters' different ways of coping with their memories is that Lucille, who chooses not to confront her past, has repressed memories haunting her, while Ruth's fluid memory is, as Sinead McDermott writes, "reconciling Ruth to her mother's death [...] [and] serves to facilitate mourning" (*H* 267). Even though many of Ruth's memories are constructions more or less based on her interpretations, like Lucille's memories, her reconstructions are more detailed, and better supported than her sister's shallow descriptions, since she flows back in time, to explore, restore and rearrange her memories several times, so they appear truthful.

One reason that the sisters' memories differ, which is connected to their fluid and solid cultural belongings, is because the representatives of these cultures position themselves differently "in relation to the past". Ruth's fluid role model is the transient Sylvie, who Ruth believes lives in "a millennial present" (*H* 94), and she also talks about memories. Lucille, on

the other hand, favours traditional Fingerbone, and to fit within the solid role the conventions in Fingerbone prescribe, she plans for her future instead of focusing her mind on her uncertain memories. So she changes her past, through exclusion of improper parts of it, in order to avoid “deformation” of the solid pattern in Fingerbone. In contrast Ruth, who belongs within the fluid culture, floats back to her unresolved memories until she figures out answers to the questions she has. She aims to develop her understanding of her past, and more specifically of her mother. This is partly done through comparing hers and her sister’s memories to each other. Ruth questions the “orderly, vigorous, and sensible [...] widow” (*H* 109) Lucille recalls, and her reaction to Ruth’s questions is to retort that Ruth deliberately remembers their mother as “the abandoner” (*H* 109), and that Ruth tries “to defend Sylvie at our mother’s expense” (*H* 110). She says this in order to end their conversation because her solid image of Helen is threatened. Lucille has a solid perspective of reality, and since she wants to be a part of Fingerbone, she disregards any memory of her dead mother that endangers her position in this solid community.

Ruth’s final reconciliation with her mother’s death, and her realization that her mother will never return to restore her reality to its earlier solid state occurs when Sylvie leaves her alone at an abandoned homestead. Ruth finds loneliness “an absolute discovery” (*H* 157), and she realizes that her mother “was music [...] lost to all sense, but not perished” (*H* 160). As long as she has her memories, and accepts that her mother is a part of them, Helen will not perish. Earlier, she has always felt her mother’s presence; the “thoughts [...] mock with their seeming slightness. If they were more substantial [...] they would sink” (*H* 145). As she accepts Helen as a part of her past, someone she is not bound to, she is enabled to heal herself and recover the part of her identity that earlier “had waited for her [mother] confidently” (*H* 120).

Furthermore, as Ruth believes that she knows how memory functions, she shows hope that Lucille remembers her (instead of letting her perish) at the end of *Housekeeping*. This occurs when Ruth narrates how she and Sylvie visit and bring leaves inside her sister’s house. As Geyh writes, the “traces Ruth imagines they have left in Lucille’s well-kept house [...] are really traces they have left in Lucille’s memory” (*H* 118). Comparable to the result of when “Lucille poked a sofa cushion [...] [and] the suppurated water vanished but the dent remained” (*H* 64), she has repressed memory traces of her family and her fluidity within herself, which create tension. Ruth feels tension too, but from her solid traits, which she represses in order to live fluidly as a transient—there is no reality that allows fluidity and solidity to coexist. Memory, on the other hand, is as shown above, not entirely fluid or solid,

but consists of both. It creates tension for characters when they try to lead lives in realities that exclude either fluidity or solidity, as their past is based on a mixture of them.

Tension caused by fluidity and solidity is also released and manifested in dreams, and dreams show fluid reflections of memories, fears, hopes, and desires. Dreams are gates to the unconscious, and these function to untangle what is difficult to face in reality. But Ruth's experience, describing that she "never distinguished readily between thinking and dreaming" (*H* 215), signals that she is traumatized, since trauma breaks down the defences that exist between the conscious and unconscious (Tyson 23). Her fluid inability to separate dream from thought frightens her since it segregates her and Lucille, whom she earlier almost shares consciousness with. Hence she tries to avoid daydreaming (consequently she also stops thinking). Lucille also tries to neglect her dreams in order to make her reality more solid. This is noticeable when Ruth has to press her sister to tell about the terrible dream she has after their night in the woods, which is also when Lucille becomes determined to merge with the solid "other world" (*H* 95). Lucille says that a woman in her dream, maybe Sylvie, "was trying to smother me" (*H* 120). This dream shows that she feels uncomfortable in Sylvie's fluid reality. Later, Ruth recalls her own dream where she once again "had been deceived" (*H* 122) while fruitlessly waiting for her mother's return. Her dream shows that she attempts to, like Michael Ondaatje describes it,<sup>1</sup> "continue a good dream": through taking "exactly the same position [...] [that she] awakened in, where the body parted from its images" (155). She expects that if she takes this position, her mother will return and continue their "good dream", which is her reality before her mother abandons her and Lucille. Ruth compares their dreams, and believes hers to be "less false than Lucille's" (*H* 122). That she finds it hard to see truth in her sister's dream is because Ruth has a fluid perspective of reality, and from this point of view it would be false to say that their aunt's transient behaviour is smothering. But for Lucille, who needs solidity and limitations to feel safe, it is true that she feels like she will be smothered and drowned in the fluidity of Sylvie's reality. And it is not until Lucille wants them to escape "Sylvie's dream" (*H* 110) that Ruth realizes how much her sister dislikes living in Sylvie's reality. It is also now that she decides that she will not follow Lucille on her solid path, which is bordered with demanding hairstyles and fashion magazines. Ruth will stay with their aunt, and she thinks that "something [...] lost might be found in Sylvie's house" (*H* 124). So both girls follow their dreams when Ruth chooses to stay in the fluid reality with Sylvie to find what is lost, and Lucille escapes the woman who "was trying to

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<sup>1</sup> "...to continue a good dream you must lie down the next night in exactly the same position you awakened in, where the body parted from its images" (Ondaatje, 155).

smother" her, and moves in with her Home Economics teacher to become a full member of solid society.

As a result of Lucille's departure, Ruth no longer struggles between her sister's solidity and Sylvie's fluidity, so her memories and dreams become more fluid and part of her reality. Ruth asks herself: "What is thought after all [...] what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate" (*H* 162). At one time she examines if dreams can turn into reality, to see whether it is possible "that memory will fulfil itself, and become [solid] flesh" (*H* 195). She calls Sylvie by her mother's name: Helen, but the obscure shape in front of her neither responds to the name Sylvie, nor to Helen, so Sylvie is not transformed into Helen, but she is focusing on something Ruth is unaware of. Sylvie's fluidity makes her easily abstracted, "as if someone [invisible] were speaking to her" (*H* 48). She believes that "Sylvie [...] felt the life of perished things" (*H* 124), and in a way she does. Sylvie confirms this when she states: "Now I look at Ruthie and I see Helen, too" (*H* 186). Ruth hopes that her aunt will reveal to her how she will be able to reconcile herself with her perished mother, and this is shown through a dream where "Sylvie was teaching me to walk under water" (*H* 175). This far, Ruth's method to reconcile herself with her mother is through repetition of memory-fragments, and her repetition of fragmented memories does not work to recover the past any more than Lucille's refusal to recall her memories. It is first when she fluidly begins to associate her memories with each other that she starts to heal and recollect her past. She goes beyond her memories of the traumatic suicide through thinking of even earlier memories, and through drawing her own conclusions from associations between memories (Rosińska 37). That she creates new interpretations of her existing memories shows that she finally accepts that there will be things from the past that she cannot find out, only have suspicions about, regardless how much she thinks about them.

In nature there is tension between solidity and fluidity since the forces of nature struggle against each other, though the environment is fluid in the sense that it is uncontrollable— independent of its fluid or solid shape. The ice on Lake Fingerbone shows tension between solidity and fluidity. It appears to Ruth "as resistant to breaching as green bones" (*H* 63), but nevertheless, the "sound of wrenching [...], as a south-flowing current heaped huge shards of ice against the north side of the bridge" (*H* 64) proves her wrong. That the seemingly solid ice breaks shows that nature is inconsistent, and thus fluid. In *Housekeeping* the characters are differently affected by nature and its fluidity, depending on their relation to fluidity and solidity.

Sylvie is a character with mostly fluid traits, and thus she does not suffer from any tension due to the changes in nature, neither does she try to keep leaves or animals outside the house she lives in. “She preferred it [the house] sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude” (*H* 99). Her fluidity makes it natural for her to invite the environment into the house, and hence she does not mourn when their house is flooded. She does not value consistency, so she stays unconcerned and pulls Ruth “after her through six grand waltz steps” (*H* 64) in the water, even though their house is deformed. Sylvie finds “equilibrium” in loss of distinctions “between the inside and the outside”, rather than in the “keeping of a balance between [them]” (Geyh 114). In contrast, the people of Fingerbone want to live in a solid reality. Thus the “restoration of the town [after each flooding] was an exemplary community effort” (*H* 74), and the people endure this fluidity, the flood, only because they are able to transform it into a solid tradition of restoration.

Both Lucille and Ruth strengthen their relation to fluidity and solidity during experiences of nature. Lucille begins to repress her fluidity after their night in the woods “never accepting that our human boundaries were overrun” (*H* 115). To avoid feeling fluidly helpless again, she attempts, as Marcia Aldrich notes, “to naturalize herself to the ‘other world’ [...] identified with the hierarchical world” (136). She tells Ruth: “‘We have to improve ourselves!’” (*H* 123), and what she means is that they should try to follow the solid rules of Fingerbone. Ruth’s experience of this night, on the other hand, initiates her “identity formation” (Ravits 654). She explains that “I simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones” (*H* 116). Afterwards, at home, she sleeps in such a way that she thinks that “this is all death is” (*H* 118). With this thought of how death must feel in her mind, her sister’s statement about improvement only makes her feel indifferent. However, Lucille is serious in her attempt to improve, as indicated above. Hence she moves in with her Home Economics teacher shortly afterwards to take her place in the solid reality of Fingerbone.

When Lucille is gone, Sylvie can initiate Ruth into her second phase of “identity formation” without interfering with, or creating tension in, the sisters’ relationship. Sylvie helps Ruth come to terms with her relation to fluidity and solidity when she leaves her at an abandoned homestead for an entire day. There she faces the world alone, develops unaffected by others, and wishes to be unhoused of her flesh to escape her feeling of loneliness (*H* 159). However, it is a bit far-fetched of Aldrich to state that “however incomplete Ruth’s transience was before the trip, she is a transient now” (137), considering Ruth’s reaction at Sylvie’s return. She wants to feel aunt’s solid body close to her then, and she focuses her mind on solid

thoughts, that is, thoughts which lead to unambiguous answers, like the trifle which colour her Sylvie's dress might have. Ruth does this in order to keep her mind away from the unsafe realizations that she risks to experience if she relaxes and lets her thoughts flow. Later on, her mind does drift, and she thinks about rebirth, but it is with bitterness that she rhetorically asks why the world would be different the second time (*H* 162). As Karen Kaivola remarks, a "new way of being, which would involve an acceptance of loss that might, paradoxically, move her beyond loss, is incomplete" (686). Another confirmation that she retreats to her internalized solidity is that she misinterprets Sylvie's manifestation of kinship as possessiveness (a non-existing state in Sylvie's fluid reality). This misapprehension is the reason for Ruth's feeling that Sylvie takes pleasure "in my dependency" (*H* 161) when her aunt actually cherishes her.

Ruth's third and final phase of initiation, which leads her to choose the fluid path of living, takes place at night in the orchard. Earlier this evening, Sylvie suggests that Ruth should try to "stand up straight [and] '[s]mile at people'" (*H* 190). This suggestion is a result of Sylvie's knowledge that the people of Fingerbone want to separate Ruth from her, since they believe that "Ruthie should have—that a young girl needs an orderly life" (*H* 187), as one lady tells her. So Sylvie tries to change her transient habits, in order to create an orderly life for her niece. She cleans the parlour, which "was full of [...] newspapers and magazines" (*H* 180), to once again make it possible to entertain visitors here. She believes that "things like that matter to them" (*H* 190), to the solid society of Fingerbone. They also "burned the entire newspaper and magazine collection" (*H* 200). When the fire is put out, Ruth runs to the orchard and hides in the darkness. She is unsure of why, but she knows that if Sylvie manages to stop being a transient, she would also stop being the Sylvie Ruth knows. While she is hiding in the orchard, she imagines a fairy child who "came to a house [where] she [...] would be transformed by the gross light into a mortal child [...] and be almost satisfied" (*H* 203-204). This is a visualization of her inner knowledge that she cannot be satisfied if she stays in solid reality and lives in a house. Earlier, she has had insights into letting go of all boundaries (during the night in the woods, and at the homestead), but she has not left all her solidity behind then. Now, in the orchard, she prepares for a life as a transient. She "felt that she was breaking the tethers of need" (*H* 204), and "could not imagine going into" (*H* 203) the house again. She "could not stay [...] and there was an end to housekeeping" (*H* 209). Ruth, as well as Lucille, makes a choice in which reality she wants to live. The tension of trying to live fluidly in a solid reality is as painful for Ruth, as it is for her sister to combine her inner solidity with the fluidity of Sylvie's housekeeping.

Although all the characters are seen through the narrator Ruth's perspective, the other characters, as well as Ruth as a character in her own story, give some evidence of how fluidity and solidity affect their identities and actions. Sylvie is presented as the most fluid character in *Housekeeping*, but her statement that "Families should not be broken" (H 186) shows that she does contain some solidity. She also shows solidity when she takes on the responsibility to buy clothes for the girls, and serve them cold food of her taste. She controls them through not asking them what they want, but one day they discover that they are "in Sylvie's dream with her" (H 110). Apart from this, Sylvie is mostly fluid. One way in which her fluid undemanding attitude is displayed is through her storytelling about overprotective mothers, which Lassner explains more thoroughly when writing that "Sylvie's stories are all about the suffering induced [...] by terrible loss in [...] mutual identification" (54). Before Ruth and Lucille hear these stories, the girls only know conventional stories about the importance of protection, and "that hoboes made a practice of whisking children under their coats" (H 95) from their time with their grandmother. The women's different themes within their storytelling show Sylvia's focus on solid protection, which is a result of missing "the dear ordinary" (H 15) that she has earlier experienced with her own children, and Sylvie's fluid attitude toward childcare. Sylvie seems comfortable with continuing to carry out her transient habits while living in Fingerbone, until these become reason enough for the inhabitants of Fingerbone to want to separate Ruth from her. As indicated above, this threat compels Sylvie to try to act according to traditional gender roles, and since she thinks that cleaning is proof of good housekeeping, she accomplishes a big cleaning. She completes this job by burning accumulated things because she believes that it would gladden the settled community of Fingerbone. That she burns Ruth's library book during this cleaning shows that she does not understand the concept of property, or what is considered valuable in solid society. Sylvie is a transient, so she does not value duration. She is satisfied when she can briefly make use of things when she needs them, and afterwards dispose of them when they do not fill a function in her fluid world anymore. As Geyh points out, "Sylvie's greatest sin is a failure to respect and maintain the intertwined limits of property and propriety [...]. Sylvie fails to observe the distinctions between public and private. [...] borrowing the rowboat over the protests of its owner [...] hopping freight trains [...] her lack of stockings" (116). Maria Holmgren Troy also points out that "Sylvie exists on the margins of human and social structures" (197), and "she exposes the 'trappings' of the private sphere" (193). She shows that it is possible to live in a house without being trapped in it. Sometimes she chooses to sleep outside, and she likes to eat food that neither requires a stove, nor leaves dirty pans that need to be washed. Sylvie

endangers the solid conventional structure in Fingerbone through proving that it is possible to survive and be satisfied without following traditional constricting gender roles. So what stops her from staying in Fingerbone is not her own urge to travel, but the people of Fingerbone. They all “knew how shallow-rooted the whole town was” (*H* 177), and for them to be able to keep their illusion of predictable solidity within their community, which transients like Sylvie disrupt, she must leave Fingerbone.

Lucille is Sylvie’s antithesis; already as a child, her perception of reality leans toward the solid direction. When Sylvie arrives in Fingerbone, Lucille firmly tells her that “you [...] need a hat. You should use hand lotion” (*H* 57); but she contains some fluidity, which is shown when she unconventionally declares that “I’m not going to school” (*H* 78). Later on, when Lucille decides to join society in Fingerbone, she has to work hard in school to make up for her earlier violation of the rules of solid society, which include going to school. She also realizes that it is impossible to become integrated into the society of Fingerbone as long as she lives with Sylvie as her guardian. So she “walked [...] to the home of [...] the Home Economics teacher [...] [who] adopted her” (*H* 140). She later tries to convince Ruth to come with her, since she misses her. Ruth also wants them to be together again, but like Lucille, she does not want to leave her reality, but wishes instead for her sister to admit fluidity into her life once more.

Even though Ruth is the narrator of *Housekeeping*, she is also a character in her own story, and the readers can follow her changes toward fluidity throughout *Housekeeping*. While she is confused, and torn between fluidity and solidity, she is increasingly turning inward, focusing on finding clues to where she belongs. Ruth becomes so absorbed by watching for signs of belonging that she is unable to communicate with most people in her surroundings. During her journey toward self-realization, her development is mainly shown to the readers through her thoughts and dreams. Her principal, whose questions she fails to respond to, says that “you’re going to have to learn to speak for yourself, and think for yourself” (*H* 135), to make her aware of her unconventional behaviour. And Ruth does get her voice back when she comes to terms with her fluidity, and finds her identity. She tells the sheriff that “I want to stay here” (*H* 206), as an answer to his suggestion that she should come and stay with him, when he tries to separate her from Sylvie. Later, when she lives as a transient with her aunt, she admits that she is “unlike other people” (*H* 214). Ruth tells us that she likes “to overhear the stories strangers tell each other” (*H* 214), while she stays quiet, even though she can talk for herself. Therefore I disagree with Kaivola when she expresses her opinion on Ruth’s development when she and Sylvie leave Fingerbone. Kaivola states that “Ruth does in a sense

become Sylvie, in other ways she does not, for she does not become at all” (689). I find it legitimate that Ruth is reserved, and that she does not know what to tell others about herself. After all, she has a past as a runaway, a time filled with carefulness about what she can reveal about herself (since she does not want the people of Fingerbone to know that she is alive at this point). On the other hand, Holmgren Troy makes an important connection when she writes that “[i]n refusing to be defined [...] and in refusing to constitute all other people as the other in relation to her self, Ruth ends up as [...] a truly transient ‘I’” (201). That Ruth is free from boundaries and limitations means that she is part of her surroundings through her mere existence. Therefore she only finds it “pleasant for a while” (*H* 214) to work as “a waitress, or clerk” (*H* 213). When solid standard procedures return, and replace the fluid change that her arrival causes, she feels the increasing stagnation, and like other things that do not move, she becomes cold, and puts “a chill on the coffee” (*H* 214). When this happens, she feels that it is time to leave.

In conclusion, tension exists between fluidity and solidity on all levels in *Housekeeping*. This is because all characters have fluid and solid traits, and their memories, dreams, and surroundings also consist of a mixture between fluidity and solidity; but there is no reality in Robinson’s novel that allows mixed manifestations of these. *Housekeeping* explores reality from two very different perspectives, and it shows characters who choose either a fluid or solid lifestyle and view of the world, which irretrievably results in tension and loss. In addition, Ruth’s narration also describes how she as well as Lucille and Sylvie fruitlessly try to live in realities with values they do not identify with. Sacrifices have to be made in order for the characters to live in any reality at all. Ruth and Sylvie must live divided from Lucille since they need fluidity in their lives, while Lucille needs solidity in hers. This unavoidable choice between either solidity or fluidity, with the loss it entails for all of the characters, is not so much a condition of life as a function of the cultural codes operating in Robinson’s novel.

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