

Spring 2021

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Recommended Citation

Johnston, Emma K., "Two Novels & Two Character Studies: Cassandra by Christa Wolf and Housekeeping by Marilynne Robinson" (2021). *Senior Projects Spring 2021*. 106.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2021/106

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Two Novels & Two Character Studies:
Cassandra by Christa Wolf and *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson

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Division of Languages & Literature Senior Project
May 2021

Cassandra: The Narrative of a Divinely Tortured Psyche

What is Christa Wolf's novel *Cassandra*? Where does it belong in the literary tradition and what is it trying to say? From a classical perspective, the novel is contentious: it follows a detailed narrative of the tragically famed yet textually underdeveloped character of Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess; it also works against the word of Homer by upholding the counter-narrative, begun by Stesicharus, that Helen of Argos was never physically in Troy, that the Trojan war was in fact fought over her phantom. The novel's more attention-catching aspects, such as its manipulation of classical tradition, violence, and explicit mentions of consensual sex acts as well as rape, have dominated the critical discourse. *Cassandra* has been predominantly conceptualized as neoteric revisionist history where the marginalized finally have a voice, where women have values and ethics of their own and men are weakling "children,"¹ ignorant playthings of more powerful forces.

While an examination of social taboos may urge a reader to pick up a book, controversy alone will not keep them engaged until the end. There must be more present in this work than a gynocentric, non-canonized classical narrative which keeps this novel relevant to every reader. *Cassandra* adapts narratives of the past to create a new story, told from the distinct perspective of its titular character. Throughout her narration, Cassandra reveals herself to be a complex individual and through this complexity *Cassandra* the novel reveals itself to be an investigation of character, as opposed to a demonstration of mythological, historical or social defiance.

The text itself is a reflection: Cassandra is looking back on her life, specifically the last ten years over which the Trojan War took place, while aboard a ship as a captive war

¹ Wolf (9)

prisoner, doomed to be executed upon her arrival to the Achaean shores. There is no obvious declaration in the text which explains why Cassandra's execution is inevitable which makes this fact even more difficult to disagree with. Cassandra **will** be executed. The stakes of her narration are the highest they could be; the time she has yet to live and to narrate are passing, page-by-page, and so her words are all the more potent, carrying the weight of her life, the importance of her lived experience.

The reflective structure of the narrative creates a span of time in which Cassandra's narration takes place as well as a span of time in which Cassandra's memories exist: there is a 'now' timeline and there is a 'then' timeline that are interwoven throughout the novel. The 'now' of the narrative exists in a tight time frame: it is Cassandra onboard, as captive, while the 'then' of the narrative encompasses the entirety of Cassandra's life until 'now.' The accelerated 'now' time frame and the inevitability of Cassandra's death, create an urgency and a necessity to the process and outcome of her narrative. In this way, the novel is a last testament of Cassandra's psyche: it is her final undertaking to express what she deems necessary in order to (potentially) make meaning out of her experiences. The memories Cassandra summons throughout the novel, while sailing closer to her death, carry with them the urgency of her situation and their reflections are therefore critical to Cassandra's narrative development.

The two intertwining 'now' and 'then' timelines support Cassandra's fascination with the idea of a 'before' and an 'after' state of being. If 'before' and 'after' exist in succession what occurs in between the two is a change. The experience of alteration and transformation inherent with a 'now and then' mentality is relevant to Cassandra: "Never was I more alive than now, in the hour of my death. What do I mean by alive? What I mean

by alive—not to shrink from what is most difficult: to change one’s image of oneself.”²

Cassandra reinforces the urgency of her testimony; she knows she does not have very long to live and she is far from welcoming death. Cassandra exerts a powerful will to live, to feel “alive,” even with her own execution looming. Cassandra professes a degree of familiarity with this feeling: the phrase “never was I **more** alive” suggests that in her past she has contemplated a similar gradient of ‘aliveness.’ However, she also admits her own confusion and ongoing process of understanding her experiences: “What do I mean by alive?” It is clear that Cassandra has metaphysical questions she wishes to answer and considers a transformation of self-identification (changing one’s image of oneself”) to be fundamental to her success.

Cassandra considers an investigation of her identity to be “most difficult” yet necessary to the feeling of being “alive,” demonstrating her association between struggle and value. By claiming certainty of this relationship, Cassandra positions her investigation of the self as courageous. However, through the very act of professing this association Cassandra reveals her own fear of a nuanced self-analysis. Already, she does not quite meet the experience head-on as much as she names it. She distances herself verbally from the experience of an identity shift by using the reflexive pronoun “oneself” in place of ‘myself,’ by turning the narrative outward in the hopes it will be understood inherently by the nameless “one” she claims experiences this “most difficult” transformation.

This is Cassandra’s unique capriciousness: her statements are clear but there is uncertainty and insecurity hidden within them. *Cassandra’s* reader must analyze her narrative closely to determine whether or not she does in fact reconceptualize her sense of

² Wolf (21)

self or if she continues, until the end of her narration and her life, to mask her true distance from a difficult and unfamiliar transformation of self-identification through her words, actions and emotions.

Doubt is present throughout *Cassandra*, in more or less obvious ways. Cassandra's emotional and spiritual uncertainty is more difficult to detect and is obscured by spurious language, such as that quoted above. Her community's doubt in her, however, is obvious and pervasive. The novel reinforces some aspects of the classical mythology including widespread public disbelief in Cassandra's prophecies.

The classical myth is told as follows: Apollo appeared to Cassandra and gifted her with prophetic abilities, however, when Apollo asked Cassandra to accept him as her lover she refused and so he cursed her prophecies to be forever doubted by all who hear them. *Cassandra* tells the same story of her prophetic inception, though the interaction with the god exists in a dream state.³ Apollo makes Cassandra a living example of the power of both a divine gift and a divine curse, creating a human character who is subject to the psychologically nuanced effects of divine intervention. Within the classical tradition, Cassandra's primary struggle is that of being disbelieved and discredited by her community and this has also been the primary focus of critical inquiry on *Cassandra*.

The struggle to be both heard and trusted is considerable amongst people of marginalized identities and it is therefore unsurprising to find extensive critical focus on the presentation of gender within *Cassandra*. Scholars of this novel have written inquiries into father-daughter relationships, sexual violence and sexual liberation, workplace inequality, and the social impacts of wartime, all through a gendered perspective with the

³ Wolf (15)

conclusion being that Cassandra, the character and the novel, work hard to disrupt patterns of patriarchy, violence and suppression.

Much of this discourse is socially motivated as opposed to psychologically or spiritually motivated; Cassandra is analyzed through her interpersonal struggles and the ways she seemingly acts in opposition to her patriarchal community who attempt to restrict her involvement and influence within the public sphere which “has been considered the space of the real and important.”⁴ In this way, *Cassandra’s* critics have analyzed this novel in the context of the character’s mythological curse of widespread social disbelief, and by doing so have overlooked elements of this retelling of Cassandra’s story which reveal her own unique relationship with self-doubt and her unstable sense of identity.

As noted, this novel is a narrative from a singular psyche, Cassandra’s, and as such should be investigated primarily through the experiences of this character, both physical and metaphysical. For too long Cassandra has been analyzed and interpreted on the basis of her social reputation; *Cassandra’s* cultural and historical relevance has been foregrounded in critical study to the neglect of the obvious psychological inquiry present within the novel.

Cassandra is not a retelling of a myth as much as it is a retelling of a character. Cassandra is not a figurehead for a movement or a body of peoples: she has a singular point of view and a particular personality. In a haste to canonize Wolf’s body work, scholars have bypassed Cassandra’s individual testimonial. The dominant focus of *Cassandra’s* critics has been her struggle to be respected by her community’s patriarchal power structures. However, the narrative of the novel illuminates Cassandra’s multifaceted personality; sometimes Cassandra does express a distinct anti-patriarchal sentiment but other times

⁴ Lacey (383)

she embodies the doubt of her community and claims her feelings arise for “no reason”⁵ at all. Cassandra embodies the experience of a particular personality however she is also a receptacle of the divine gift of prophecy: foretelling of the future, prediction of fate. Because she is a receptacle of this gift, Cassandra’s process of self-identification is surrounded by divine interjections conceived outside of her psyche and completely disconnected to her sense of self. Her inability to control or understand these forces, combined with her community’s complete disbelief, increase her self-doubt and inability to outgrow familiar patterns of identification.

She often speaks with such confidence—clear statements containing a single idea—that her capriciousness is less obvious. In this way, Cassandra’s opinions do not invite the possibility of an alternative: “All men are self-centered children.” Quotations such as this one from *Cassandra* are easily collected to resemble a confident expression of defiance to patriarchal systems by a radical and subversive figure of womanhood. However, this Cassandra has outgrown any singular narrative or socio-political manifesto, she is a fully developed character, and no one, including herself, is so holy to lack shortcoming and insecurity. Cassandra makes many statements of intention and value but the true point of interest to a scholar of this novel should be whether her narrative development is congruous with her intentions or whether powerful egoistic and divine forces impede upon her ability to uphold these statements.

Some of Cassandra’s apparent confidence comes from her willingness to scorn others. She does not often offer context for her judgements but states them simply and with little explanation. Cassandra’s value judgements on individuals tend to turn outward to

⁵ Wolf (114)

include her whole community, or even people in general. Panthous, Cassandra's mentor in the priesthood, approaches her: "I got angry for no reason when I merely looked at him—narrow, shrunken, wearing the women's garments of the priest, and the big head on top. Always the cynical grin. I did not like people on whom you could smell the fear."⁶ There is a strong sense of vanity in this judgement by Cassandra: focusing as heavily as she does on Panthous' appearance seems irrelevant, pretentious and physically privileged. A metaphorical interpretation of her words reveals an even greater sense of Cassandra's obliviousness: "narrow" minded and "big head[ed]" are themselves colloquial interpretations of arrogance. Cassandra may be pointing out this quality in her mentor, however, in the same spurious statement she clearly displays an ignorant egoism of her own through her imperious statements that lack evidence.

In this passage, Cassandra linguistically moves through a description and into a value judgement, but her confidence lacks explanation and insight. Again, Cassandra's statements turn outward, towards obscurity and vagueness through her words. Instead of providing an investigation into the emotions behind her opinion, she claims a complete lack of implication ("for **no** reason") and reprehends the presentation of fear in nameless "people" without examining this quality within her mentor or within herself.

Cassandra's tendency towards vague and overreaching value judgements impede upon her personal growth. She fails to find transformative insight in her own experiences because she does not or cannot think through them completely. It is not always clear which of Cassandra's experiences lack detail and explanation because she willingly withholds it or because she cannot herself access it. Cassandra moves so quickly from one thought to

⁶ Wolf (114)

another that a reader has to slow down and re-read in order to notice that there are inconsistencies in her opinions, intentions, and value judgements as well as very little evidence of their formations from within or outside of her psyche. Cassandra does not often admit when she is doubtful and therefore her true psychological experience is obscured to her reader.

If “fear” is another name for doubt, and Cassandra dislikes perceivable fear, it makes sense that she strives for a presentation of courage and assurance within herself as well as others. As noted, Cassandra makes statements with punitive language and assertive conviction and yet these judgements, and the demonstration of confidence that Cassandra attempts to present, mask her psychological confusion. Cassandra cannot escape obscurity in her language even when she attempts to sustain a particular thought.

In rare moments, Cassandra reveals her own self-doubt; she reveals that she is painfully insecure: “Wherever I look or cast my thoughts, there is no god, no judgement, only myself. Who is it that makes my self-judgement so severe, into death and beyond?”⁷ Cassandra acknowledges the boundaries her egoism has confined her to: she cannot escape her own perspective, cannot find significance outside of herself and yet is still unfulfilled to be metaphysically alone. The “Who” here is of course herself and it is unfortunate that within a moment of distinct self-reflection Cassandra cannot conceptualize the already present divine forces which affect her. She fails to put her faith in a higher power (a “god”) through which she can place spiritual blame for the inception of her “severe” self-judgement. She reaches no conclusion. Cassandra appears to be the one in whom doubt is the most apparent, provided her critics look closely. Her words are deceptive and

⁷ Wolf (23)

deflective but illuminate her obvious inability to engage in complete self-reflection and expression.

It is apparent that this narrative is not one of inspiration and esteem. Cassandra loses the authority her critics once granted her to be a voice of honor within an honorless society because her speech is steeped in self-doubt and confusion. *Cassandra's* critics had big hopes for her: they hoped she would be a luminary. They said: "Cassandra is to be given a voice of her own in order to offer an alternative to the dominant discourse, for herself and for women generally."⁸ To be in a position where one's singular testimony holds space for the entirety of one's gender is to occupy an extremely prestigious space; it is an impossibility, a gross overstatement.

Even those critics who recognize Cassandra's singularity underestimate the possibility her words might lose their authority due to her self-deception: "Though she admits that there are other points of view, she is not concerned with them; indeed, the necessity of coming to terms with her own personality means that she has to exclude other perspectives."⁹ As noted, Cassandra's statements and judgements do not leave much space for an alternative point of view. It is true that Cassandra rejects perspectives prescribed by her community but she also neglects to comprehend any perspective that exists outside of her ego, even when her conclusions leave her spiritually unfulfilled. Cassandra's examination of her psyche lacks nuance: she internalizes and echoes the rigid, hierarchical structure of values her community upholds as opposed to dismantling it. Cassandra was honest in admitting that a change in her sense of self would be her "most difficult" task: for

⁸ Lacey (379)

⁹ Guthrie (184)

all of her inconsistencies and vagueness, Cassandra does not easily open her mind to alternate points of view, even when she cannot fully explain her own.

Cassandra's doubt and fear of the unknown has trapped her inside of familiar systems of judgement and self-identification; she is stuck inside a psychological loop of egoistic ignorance and metaphysical loneliness. A divine prophecy offers the most obvious possibility for an experience outside of her familiar sense of self. Cassandra is a strange receptacle for this divine gift: after all, she admits her own lack of faith (she calls herself an "unbeliever"¹⁰) and inability to surrender her sense of self to the will of any "god."

The dreamstate that surrounds the receipt of this gift from Apollo obscures the need for Cassandra to describe how exactly it came to be and why. People rarely have control of their actions in dreams, events simply **occur** and are therefore incredibly difficult to dispute or explain. The lack of explanation as to the inception of Cassandra's prophetic abilities would be more easily explainable by this dreamstate if Cassandra did not also occupy the position, in her community, of a dream interpreter. Cassandra hypothetically can and therefore should explain this dream and the reception of the prophetic gift but does not, perhaps cannot, due to its divine nature. She recognizes her own position as dream interpreter but claims that this particular dream was "unsummoned"¹¹ by her psyche and therefore is not completely comprehensible to her.

Cassandra understands part but not all of her divinely incepted dream. She knows that she was given the gift of prophecy but she does not know why it was given; she claims she wanted this gift but she does not know why she wanted it. Cassandra's description of the dream exemplifies her confused and multifaceted psychological experience; it is not

¹⁰ Wolf (23)

¹¹ Wolf (15)

completely clear to Cassandra or to her reader what aspects of her experience are divinely incited and which arise out of her own personality or ego. In her dream, she is approached by: "Apollo, the god of the seers. Who knew what I ardently desired: the gift of prophecy, and he conferred it on me with a casual gesture..."¹² This "casual gesture" which implements the gift of prophecy to Cassandra is divinely outside of her conception so she must resort to vagueness in its description. However, Cassandra's own "ardent desire" for the prophetic gift is also unexplainable. Cassandra desires this ability fervently, earnestly, but she cannot figure out why. Cassandra confronts the boundaries of her knowledge and is frustrated. She repeats the question: "Why did I want the gift of prophecy, come what may?"¹³ without arising at a clear answer. Cassandra cannot imagine this very desire may be divinely implanted into her psyche and yet she cannot explain it through her familiar structure of values.

A prophecy does not immediately follow this dream of her reception of the prophetic gift. Years pass and the Trojan War begins. One day in her family's banquet hall, Paris states his intention to sail to Sparta and abduct Helen, the wife of Menelaus the King, and Cassandra experiences her first divine prophecy:

But I, I alone saw. Or did I really "see"?...I felt. Experienced—yes, that's the word. For it was, it is, an experience when I "see," when I "saw." Saw that the outcome of this hour was our destruction. Time stood still, I would not wish that on anyone. And the cold of the grave. The ultimate estrangement from myself and from everyone. That is how it seemed. Until finally the dreadful torment took the form of a voice; forced its way out of me, through me,

¹² Wolf (15)

¹³ Wolf (4,9)

dismembering me as it went; and set itself free...”Woe,” it shrieked. “Woe, woe. Do not let the ship depart!”¹⁴

It is notable that this experience is not a pleasant one for Cassandra. Her description (“grave,” “dreadful torment,” “dismembering”) makes the experience of prophecy sound extremely painful and possibly fatal, at least psychologically. This appears to be Cassandra’s closest experience with a transformation of subjectivity and sense of self gained through a “most difficult” struggle; the feeling of “ultimate estrangement” from herself and others implies this to be true. However, in this statement there is already evidence that the process was not completely a transformative one for Cassandra due to a continued separation of her ego-identity from divine insight.

Cassandra’s fear of faith in powerful forces outside of her control is evident: she does not want to speak these words rather they “forced” their way out of her mouth. Though she regrets her inability to find another form of faith during times of insecurity or self-scrutiny (a “Who” who is not herself) she remains fearful and disturbed by the unfamiliar. Cassandra’s inflexible psyche is ill equipped to accept a divine transformation of perspective and is overwhelmed by the experience of prophecy. She cannot expand her sense of self to include a power beyond her control or conception, cannot give up the domination of her own perspective.

The prophetic experience exceeds the grasp of Cassandra’s memory. Immediately following her words of “woe” Cassandra’s perspective vanishes: “The abyss opened. Darkness. I fell headlong.”¹⁵ What follows this are several descriptions of her physicality that Cassandra claims have been relayed to her from witnesses of the event: the phrases

¹⁴ Wolf (59)

¹⁵ Wolf (59)

“They say,” “they tell me,” and “so they say” emphasize Cassandra’s memory failure and further obscure her understanding of the whole prophetic experience.

Though she may not have a distinct memory of the “horrifying gurgling noises” she made or the way she “foamed at the mouth,”¹⁶ Cassandra does maintain some understanding of the prophetic message, vaguely described as “our destruction.” She understands the “outcome” of this moment to be Troy’s fall but again she does not and cannot understand the nuances of how or why this will come to be because her sense of self cannot be transformed to include unexplainable omniscient forces. She places her faith in what she knows best: her own perspective.

Cassandra centers her perspective of the prophetic experience, as her language reveals: “But I, I alone saw.” This sentiment may be true about her physical situation: her peers may not “see” or experience what she does, however, this divine experience is not within Cassandra’s control or conception and therefore is not inherently connected to her ego, the “I” that is experiencing it.

She is aware the prophecy will bring about death, but she cannot see that this fate is not her immediate doing: “I did not want to feed this body. I wanted this criminal body, where the voice of death had its seat, to starve, to wither away.”¹⁷ Post-prophecy, Cassandra’s sense of self-importance has grown: in this sentence she has given her body’s mere existence the power of mass destruction. It is true that if Cassandra’s body did not exist, this prophecy would not exist. However, the inevitability of Troy’s fall persists, with or without its fortelling. In this statement Cassandra not only exemplifies her own destructive egoism but the complete disunity between her mortal psyche and divine insight.

¹⁶ Wolf (59)

¹⁷ Wolf (60)

After the prophecy, Cassandra supports her sense of self through her familiar hierarchical value system. She sensed doom in the prophecy and so punishes herself (“this body”) for its inception; she judges the experience too quickly, without recognizing her inability to completely understand it. *Cassandra’s* critics hoped her persistent superciliousness would deflect the pervasive doubt of her community instead of reflecting it but her inability to accept the power of divine forces reveals an impassible psychic ignorance. Cassandra does not anticipate that the departing ship, the announcement of which triggered the prophetic vision of doom, could fail to bring Helen to Troy.

Cassandra’s faith that her own perspective contains reliable insight is flawed. In fact, her self-importance impedes upon her understanding of her community which further obscures her understanding of the prophecy which involves it. Post-prophecy, Cassandra is more concerned with maintaining her singular sense of self than investigating the distinctions of her community: “Believe me, not believe me—they would see.”¹⁸ She does not attempt to change her community’s mind about her or the prophecy; she believes thier fate will prove her singular omniscience.

Cassandra believes in the completeness of her perspective to the perpetuation of her own ignorance; Paris is unable to obtain Helen in reality but her community upholds the assumption that he did and Cassandra does not question it. In her haste to maintain a sense of power over her psyche, Cassandra assumes her understanding of the prophetic message to be complete, therefore she does not assume a lie could pass her by unforeseen. Cassandra has not foreseen Helen’s absence from Troy and Cassandra’s community insists

¹⁸ Wolf (24)

Helen is in Troy so her ignorance is perpetuated and she believes Helen's abduction was successful.

With Troy's imminent military demise looming, Cassandra makes a final plea to Paris to release Helen back to their enemy and is finally faced directly with the truth: "Wake up, Sister. Ye gods: She doesn't exist.'...Yes, I believed him. I had felt it for a long time, had been eaten up with fear." ¹⁹ Cassandra finally recognizes the persistence of her own fear and self-doubt but her community's destruction is already upon her and she still neglects to understand that these qualities are fixed in her psyche. Cassandra's contradictory conditions of self-security and self-doubt are intertwined and inalterable due to her divine gift and curse.

Troy's doomsday occurs. However, Troy's destruction does not come about, as Cassandra believes, because she predicted it or, as *Cassandra's* critics believe, because her community does not believe her. The destruction of Troy was divine fate. Cassandra's prophecy was an opportunity for insight, divinely cursed from its inception not to succeed. *Cassandra*, the novel, complies with this mythological curse and provides a unique study of the character's psyche that is radically human: exceptionally self-encouraged albeit innately erroneous.

¹⁹ Wolf (68)

Housekeeping: The Expression of Ruth's Uniquely Fluid Psyche

In the novel *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, Ruth tells the story of her childhood, growing up in the (fictional) northwestern town of Fingerbone. Ruth is recounting memories and reflecting upon them from a distance of several years, though her age at the time of her narration and therefore the exact amount of time that has passed between her experiences and her reflections is unclear. Ruth's relative age at the time of her narration is important because she is no longer the child she once was. Ruth now has legal and social autonomy, she is now her own 'housekeeper.' At the time of her narration, Ruth is in charge of her own care and has an ability to make decisions about her life that she did not have when she was a child.

First person narration positions Ruth as the novel's primary creative executor: Ruth's words are that of the novel and thus she speaks for *Housekeeping* on a whole; *Housekeeping* is Ruth's investigation and expression of the formation of her sense of self. Her first words, "My name is Ruth,"²⁰ attest that this novel is a declaration of her own existence. Throughout her narration, Ruth produces a nuanced exploration of her identity through an examination of her community and home life. Ruth considers her unique values and desires as well as the ways in which they do or do not uphold those accepted by her community; she also considers the ways in which her own desires and values do or do not align with those of her childhood caregivers, those who once held legal and social authority over her being.

Fingerbone's community upholds a rigid, binary mindset of what is right and what is wrong: certain things people should and should not desire, certain ways things should and

²⁰ Robinson (3)

should not be done, rooted deeply in traditional protestant values of order, discipline, and above all amenability to one's prescribed role within the greater community. America was colonized upon protestant ethics and Ruth asserts Fingerbone's intense adherence to a religious system of values: "For if Fingerbone were remarkable for anything besides loneliness and murder, it was for religious zeal of the purest and rarest kind."²¹ Fingerbone's severe social deficiencies ("loneliness and murder") are combatted by an equally severe sense of righteousness rooted in uncompromising dedication (or "zeal") to religious tradition.

The promotion and perpetuation of the binaries associated with this rigid value system work to organize individual members of society into easily governable units, either this **or** that, in order to keep the community in smooth, perpetual operation. Unfortunately, this system of social governance contains dramatic oversimplifications of human values and desires and often harms its own members by its compliance to a dual rigidity and its inability to embrace points of view that deviate from the accepted binary system of values. This is the case with Ruth: her diversity is met with communal contempt and she is unable to gain social authority.

Ruth's has a unique point of view and differing values to those who surround her; this is obvious to her and she desires to investigate the nuances of her perspective as well as the process of her psyche's formation, from her childhood onward: "When did I become so unlike other people?"²² It is clear that this novel is an exploration of a singular perspective in comparison to a communal experience, interested in dissecting broad categorizations through detailed and unique analysis.

²¹ Robinson (182)

²² Robinson (183)

Ruth's question of "When" her sense of self became so separate from those around her explains her examination of distinct memories grounded in her experiences of family and caregiving. Ruth is reflecting on memories from a time in her life when her sense of self was, by its nature of youth, less developed: meaning, less capable of being examined and understood by Ruth (the self that was experiencing these memories) within her larger social context. Ruth is also reflecting on memories from a time in her life when her perspective, by its nature of youth, was perpetually doubted by her community. As stated, a child has no legal or social authority and therefore their perspective is only widely validated in retrospect; now that Ruth is an adult, her self-knowledge is less easily dismissable and better equipped to reject outside intervention.

If a child has no legal autonomy over their being, what kind of autonomy could, or should, they possess? Fingerbone's residents consider children to be subordinate to and completely dependent on their caregivers; children are considered vulnerable, impressionable, defenseless, and unwise. In Ruth's community, children are not granted dominance over their own self-identification. Children are considered ciphers within the greater society, innately lacking an acceptable system of values and therefore desperately in need of a moral and spiritual guide to mold them into a 'correct' understanding of and participation within their surrounding society. In order to be considered a successful communal resident, a caregiver must live by example, must embody the communal ideal and accept their authority over children as a social guide. Similarly, a child must submit to this authority and attempt to demonstrate the same guiding principles and values.

Ruth and her sister Lucille experienced a tumultuous and traumatic home life throughout their childhood. They grew up in the "keeping" of multiple caregivers: their

mother, Helen (until she committed suicide), then their grandmother, Sylvia (until she died of old age), then their great aunts, Lily and Nona (neither of which had any experience with children since their own childhoods), until finally their mother's sister, their aunt Sylvie, accepted the role. The bulk of Ruth's narrative focuses on the period of time when Sylvie was responsible for her and Lucille's care and homelife as Sylvie was their final caretaker, the 'housekeeper' who garnered the most scorn from Fingerbone's residents, and Ruth's only empathetic and cooperative social and spiritual guide.

Children (and their subsequent care) are of particular concern to Fingerbone's residents due to their socially accepted state of dependence. Ruth's community does not attempt to gain her perspective on her own home life: after all, Ruth is not only a child and therefore innately inept, but she is also a child who has never experienced a steady home life and therefore has never experienced the social conditioning necessary to uphold the community's accepted values. Ruth's caregivers have been perpetually out of touch with the residents of Fingerbone, by choice: "My grandmother had been rather isolated because she had no interest in people younger than herself. We [Ruth and her sister] and the paperboy were the only people under sixty to whom she was consistently polite. Lily and Nona, of course, had had little contact with local society..."²³ It is therefore unsurprising that Fingerbone's residents assume Ruth, who is considered highly impressionable, has been encouraged by her past caregivers (either directly or through example) to separate herself from her community both physically and metaphysically.

A rude and "isolated" caregiver is not a socially respectable caregiver and, by Fingerbone's standards, is a potentially dangerous caregiver: destructive to both the

²³ Robinson (74)

preservation of the greater community and to the acceptable development of the recipients of their care. Communities such as Fingerbone exist because their residents continue to support and promote their existence. Fingerbone's institutions of operation function successfully because individuals are physically present to continue their operation. Therefore, individual isolation or non-participation in communal institutions (encouraged by maladaptive values) is counterproductive to the continued functioning of the community as a whole. Even before Sylvie's arrival to Fingerbone and her legal acquisition of Ruth and Lucille's care, the residents of the community were skeptical of the children's ethical development due to the inadequate prior "keeping" of their house.

Because Fingerbone's residents consider children ill equipped to interpret their community's accepted, binary value system without proper guidance, they view maladaptive care as potentially damaging to a child's development of a socially acceptable identity. Sylvie's assumption of caregiver coincided with an important time in Ruth's formation of identity. Though her exact age is unclear, it can be determined (by Ruth's detailed memory of her previous home, before her mother brought her to her grandmother's house in Fingerbone, as well as her assertion that she lived in her grandmother's care for "five years"²⁴) that Ruth is about ten to twelve years old upon Sylvie's arrival. Around this approximate age, children begin to experience a variety of developmental changes including not only increased physical strength and coordination but also increased social consciousness and metaphysical contemplation. The increased nuance of perspective gained through early adolescence provides a particularly fertile ground for the formation of an individual's distinct sense of self, therefore, the residents of Fingerbone

²⁴ Robinson (24)

recognize this age to be crucial to the assimilation of the child's sense of self with the communal system of values.

Sylvie arrives, assumes the position of caregiver, and begins to defy Fingerbone's social norms. Some of Sylvie's particularities are only immediately noticeable to Ruth and Lucille, the recipients of her care and "housekeeping." For example, as Ruth recalls, "Sylvie liked to eat supper in the dark."²⁵ Sylvie also allowed leaves to blow into the house through open windows and "gather in the corners"²⁶ for months at a time. However, when Sylvie allows Ruth and Lucille to miss weeks of school at a time, her deviation from the community's expectations of a successful caregiver becomes socially obvious.

Sylvie's way of keeping house and her methods of ethical guidance are not congruent with Fingerbone's conception of an acceptable social and ethical guide so the community scorns Sylvie and pities the children. The housekeepers of Fingerbone consider it their spiritual responsibility to intervene upon Ruth's home life, to attempt to 'correct' the wrongful care Sylvie has been providing and the unsatisfactory example of self-identification they believe Sylvie has been embodying:

"They were obliged to come by their notions of piety and good breeding... They had reason to feel that my social graces were eroding away and that soon I would feel ill at ease in a cleanly house with glass in its windows—I would be a ghost, and their food would not answer to my hunger, and my hands could pass through their down quilts and tatted pillow covers and never feel them or find comfort in them."²⁷

As stated, Fingerbone's residents believe a child must be guided into an traditionally approved sense of self or it is very possible that they will never become communally

²⁵ Robinson (86)

²⁶ Robinson (84)

²⁷ Robinson (183)

acceptable. The value system of Ruth's community is meant to support (or "comfort") its residents through reliable conditions of self-identification and provide adequate nourishment to their metaphysical needs (or "hunger") through the righteousness of devotion to religious tradition (a "pure" sense of "piety").

Fingerbone's binary value system, meant to provide support and comfort through guidance, is destructively rigid: it does not accept compromise or doubt, and therefore does not allow for the peaceful existence of autonomous self-identification and self-expression. In devotion to their accepted values, the residents of Fingerbone descend upon Ruth's household, defending their scorn of Sylvie's 'housekeeping' through the righteousness of spiritual "obligation."

Ruth did not ask for these opinions and, as noted, these residents never asked Ruth for her own. Ruth's words reveal the validity of her community's concern that her sense of self does not necessarily include their socially accepted methods of being: her community's metaphorical comforts appear "tattered," and fail to arouse her senses. It is clear that Ruth's personal values do not completely align with those of her surrounding community. However, Fingerbone's residents neglect to validate the existence of Ruth's independent self-expression, and instead cite Sylvie's maladapted guidance as the source of Ruth's personal deviation from social norms. As noted, Fingerbone's community considers children to lack authority over their own perspective due to their impressionability.

This question is routinely considered by critics of *Housekeeping*: does Ruth actively develop her sense of self by defining her own values and claiming authority over her experiences or does she conform her sense of self to reflect a pre-existing paradigm by passively accepting her caregiver's values and surrendering any authority over her

experiences to more powerful forces, be they social or spiritual. It is not an easy question to answer as Ruth's perspective is vaguely non-conforming: she passes judgements and draws conclusions about her experiences but these statements leave much room for interpretation due to her frequent use of metaphoric and symbolic language.

Housekeeping is Ruth's investigation and expression of the interactions between her own sense of self, her caregiver's sense of self, and her community's accepted binaries of self-identification. Ruth is expected, by her community as well as her critics, to embody either this **or** that perspective: either active arbiter or passive victim. However through Ruth's narration, she reveals a much more fluid sense of self, unreliant upon predetermined methods of self-identification.

Ruth demonstrates her uniquely fluid perspective through metaphoric and symbolic language which simultaneously confound and elucidate the explanations of her metaphysical experiences. For example, Ruth describes her experience with receiving social attention: "I felt the notice of people all over me, like the presence of a denser medium."²⁸ Metaphors are rhetorical, descriptive tools ordinarily used to explain an abstract concept by comparison to a more concrete concept. Ruth's metaphors, however, often involve the comparison of two abstract ideas, such as the feeling of people's "notice" and the "presence of a denser medium."

The literary success of a metaphor is traditionally determined by how well the comparison creates a unified understanding of the experience being described. In this way, the success of a metaphor is reliant on a purely theoretical agreement between author and reader that the two concepts at hand can understandably be equated. By equating two

²⁸ Robinson (121)

concepts each entirely subject to individual interpretation, Ruth muddles the traditional use of metaphor to reject a singular interpretation; every reader of *Housekeeping* will have differing conceptions of what the “presence of a denser minimum” might feel like. Ruth’s use of individually interpretable phrases creates the space necessary for all interpretations to have an equal opportunity to be considered right or wrong: or, for any and every interpretation to exist simultaneously, unrestrained by a binary conception of identity or hierarchical system of values.

Ruth’s narration does not offer a reliable domination of perspective; her distinct metaphysical experiences are vaguely described through endlessly interpretable metaphors. However, this is not due to a lack of analytical thought, as Fingerbone’s residents assume, but to an abundance of critical inquiry. Ruth’s values, desires and sense of self neglect to reflect either her community’s system of social ethics or Sylvie’s methods of opposition to these principles. Ruth’s examination of the development of her unique sense of self necessitates a linguistic absence of rigidity: she attempts a nuanced exploration without the desire to arrive at a singular ‘correct’ conclusion but rather to arrive at a conclusion which embraces a fluid sense of being.

Ruth’s inquisitive yet inconclusive language reveals her unconstrained sense of self. Ruth’s lack of rigidity in her values and desires allows her to accept new methods of housekeeping and cohabitate collaboratively with Sylvie, due to Sylvie’s steadfast rejection of structure and discipline. When she is around Sylvie, Ruth’s inquisitive mind is free to wander without fear of inhibition or intervention: this is the uniqueness of their relationship.

Ruth explains the rarity that was her and Sylvie’s symbiotic perception and reception of each other’s distinct presences, during their shared time of keeping house: “She could forget I was in the room. She could speak to herself, or to someone in her thoughts, with pleasure and animation, even while I sat beside her—this was the measure of our intimacy, that she gave almost no thought to me at all.”²⁹ Sylvie’s presence lacks the distinct, “dense” feeling of “notice” that Ruth finds to be oppressively inescapable with everyone else in her community. In Sylvie’s presence, Ruth embodies this same “intimate” lack of “notice”: she does not desire to know whom Sylvie may be speaking to or the precise content and context of her speech, unless Sylvie addresses her directly.

Ruth’s fluidity of being allows her to easily maintain a balance between active and passive attention when she is in the presence of cooperative company. This ability to turn Fingerbone’s binary hierarchy of attention, values, and sense of self fluid is Ruth’s unique psychological gift which keeps her from perpetuating her community’s destructive social norms through repetitive cycles of ignorance and arrogance. Fingerbone’s residents demand that Sylvie change her way of being in order to be a successful caregiver, however, Ruth is perfectly comfortable collaborating with Sylvie’s innate and inalterable distinctions in order to benefit from her “intimate” care and company: “It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave.”³⁰ Ruth recognizes Sylvie’s own history of unstable ‘housekeeping.’ Ruth’s fluid sense of self as well as her own history with erratic homelife allows her to accept and adapt to Sylvie’s need for variability. This “transient” quality of Sylvie’s psyche has been condemned without empathetic investigation by the residents of Fingerbone due to their rigid hierarchy of values. Ruth demonstrates her

²⁹ Robinson (195)

³⁰ Robinson (103)

unique differences from her community through her willingness to collaborate through compassionate and radical acceptance of an individual's experience.

It is consistent for Ruth to ultimately be unable to determine a singular answer to her question of "When" or how her unique psyche came to be. As stated, *Housekeeping* is Ruth's exploration into her sense of self through an examination of her childhood memories. Though the context surrounding Ruth's decision to undertake the process of recollection and reflection on these memories is unclear, it is clear that she presently has social and legal autonomy; she is her own housekeeper. This independence was inaccessible to her throughout her childhood, when she was both socially and legally obligated to comply with her community's system of values in order to ensure her continued care and wellbeing.

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