

Reconnecting With Nature: A Journey of Self Discovery in Robinson's Novel Housekeeping

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Article Received: 15/11/2022,

Article Accepted: 20/12/2022,

Published Online: 25/12/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.12.11

Abstract:

The present paper delves into the idea of self-discovery through the study of nature. In the 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, Robinson discusses how nature influences one's personal growth. The transcendentalist's view of nature is incorporated in order to understand how man shares an intimate bond with nature which is very crucial in the understanding of one's true identity. Robinson finds nature's role as integral to human's development of 'self.' This paper traces how the protagonist of the novel Ruth attains her identity and rejects away the conventional and societal norms by entering into wilderness. The paper discusses how by developing an understanding of one's natural surroundings one can come closer to one's authentic self.

Keywords- Identity, Landscape, Nature, Self-discovery, Freedom, Wilderness.

Nature is a living entity like human beings. Since creation nature's role has been integral to human's development of the self. It is a living concept which acts as a healer for both man's body and soul. Human beings are also a part of the natural cycle and therefore, understanding nature and human-nature relationship and the interaction is of great importance for man's understanding of the self and the mystery of being. All human beings are in search for connection, the one which connects us to others and the one which connects us to our selves. And undoubtedly nature plays a vital role in the second area, bringing us closer to our own selves. It plays a very significant role in shaping our physical, emotional, moral and spiritual ideas. Precisely speaking environment is an extension of self, showing how human and natural world are inter-connected and how both evolve in the company of each other. Thus, Nature is inherent in configuration of the self and in establishing the holistic well-being. The interaction with the environment provides man with opportunities to know and understand themselves and the world around them establishing a spiritual connection with nature thus reaching the higher truth.

In the literary scene of America, Nature remains significant in nurturing the democratic virtues of an individual. The relationship between man and nature is of critical importance in literature as a theme. Specifically in American literature, the great transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau have viewed nature as fundamental in man's evolution of self providing freedom, strength and humility. Emerson in his seminal essay *Nature* acknowledges that every environmental problem arises due to man's 'resumption of power' (Emerson: 31) and therefore, man must cultivate a harmonious relationship with the environment in order to live wholly. Emerson emphasizes that every individual needs to develop a partnership with the environment in which he lives in order to live an authentic life. As he writes of nature: 'We come to our own, and make friends with matter, which the ambitious chatter of the schools would persuade us to despise. We never can part with it; the mind loves its old home' (Emerson: 36). But, in the modern fast pacing world man has forgotten nature's place. Today we are immersed in the superficialities of city life, suffering from alienation, anxiety and loneliness. Modern man is burdened by various pressures and deadlines of life, irksome obligations and surveillance as suggested by Emerson who aptly notes that '[c]ities give not the human senses room enough' (36). Thoreau the first environmentalist has also said that materialistic values cannot bring peace in one's life rather it indicates a lack of spiritual self-reliance. He said: 'Our lives are frittered away in details...simplify, simplify' (Thoreau: 119) suggesting that people are concerned too much about insignificant things which are not actually important.

Marilynne Robinson is well-known for her distinctive style and deep love of nature, both of which are deeply reflected in her writing. She is heavily influenced by the American transcendentalists of the nineteenth century. In her novel *Housekeeping* (1980), she describes her observations of the Western landscape. The novel's structure is dominated by nature, which includes a narrative and the entire landscape in human terms. She believes that by entering into a healthy and compassionate relationship with nature one can become aware of one's identity and the innate bond with environment can bring a new level of being and awareness. Robinson's understanding of self is derived from the observation of human experience, particularly self-awareness and consciousness and assigning value to it. Robinson describes the ability of 'self-awareness as –'I do not mean merely consciousness of one's identity, or of the complex flow of thought, perception, memory, and desire, important as these is. I mean primarily the self that stands apart from itself, that questions, reconsiders, appraises' (*Absence of Mind*:118). Robinson's idea of 'self' also talks about the female quest of self and role of nature in making one realize his/her authentic selfhood. The transcendentalist's view of nature is incorporated in order to understand how man shares a bond with nature which is very crucial in the understanding of one's true nature.

Robinson has through her works tried to enquire about man's relation with nature. She believes that by seeing our lives in connection with nature can solve much of the environmental crisis. Robinson like Emerson suggests a healthy kinship and closeness between man and nature. In her works she depicts all living beings including human and non-human world as sacred and valuable. Following Emerson's line of thought she sees nature as a divine moral

imperative which would lead man discover God in himself. Robinson also believes in the power and divinity of nature which can heal a man's tormented soul, imparting it with life's simplicity and true meaning. Like a true transcendentalist Robinson believes in a simple life full of kindness, reverence and compassion for all humans and non-human world instead of becoming slaves to commerce and development in the name of progress. She says that in order to find oneself, the higher truth is to return to nature which demands us to go back to one's native roots which craves for spiritual self-reliance and sense of unity with nature instead of running and killing for money and other materialistic dependencies.

Marilynne Robinson believes that the role of the landscape is crucial because it influences how an individual develops their identity. In the essay *Wilderness* she says:

In fact, I started writing fiction at an eastern college, partly in hopes of making my friends there understand how rich and powerful a presence a place can be which, to their eyes, is forbidding and marginal, without population or history, without culture in any form recognizable to them. All love is in great affliction. My bond with my native landscape was an unnamable yearning, to be at home in it, to be chastened and acceptable, to be present in it as if I were not present at all. (*Death of Adam*: 246)

Nature exposes the self to the self-chastening and self-doubting experience of awe but at the same time it threatens to crumble the self undermining the foundations of individuality. By trying to understand the ecosystem's interconnectedness one can connect with one's inner self and facilitate self-examination and development.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth, the protagonist, seeks shelter in the natural world to know about her real self under the direction of her vagrant aunt Sylvie. Ruth and Sylvie have no place in the typical society because their inclinations and thinking are against the conventional roles assigned to women. In order to become a part of the society they would have to transform themselves and live according to the desired norms of female behavior. In contrast, the natural world not only accepts Ruth but also helps in her quest to identity. Ruth finally finds a connection with the natural world rather than the man-made society which not only restricts her from attaining her autonomous identity but tries to mould her into something which she is not. Ruth discovers her very self and her concept of freedom with the assistance of nature. In the novel Robinson has also very subtly raised the issue of nature's representation. In addition to detailing a woman's liberation from dualistic constructs, the novel also discusses the provision of space for nature to express itself. Her characters go through myriad experiences and feelings because of their bond with nature and by figurative treatment of nature.

Ruth realizes that the time she spends in nature helps her discover her inner self and her loyalty does not lie to the man-made conventional society that always tries to limit her female sense of freedom. This is shown by the two scenes in *Housekeeping*, each of which takes place

over the course of a night spent outside. Ruth's intimate experience in nature helps her in understanding her tendencies. Ruth fully empathizes with nature during her time away from home in the woods, whereas Lucille, her younger sister, develops a fear of it. Lucille was terrified when she realized that the blurring lines between nature and herself were threatening her sense of self-identity and as result after arriving at home, she dresses appropriately, fixes her hair, and goes to the pharmacy. During their second stay Sylvie introduces Ruth to the 'maternal valley,' a place where only loneliness and cold were the vital elements. Ruth is taken into the woods by Sylvie and left there alone. Ruth finally gives up her romantic longings for her mother and the past after experiencing her mother's domineering presence in a stark and heartbreaking survival course. Ruth's ability to recognize things before they become mere objects aids in her decision to move around freely.

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth's development and comprehension of her own self is greatly influenced by her sense of place. The fabric of where is very delicately intertwined with self-realization and self-knowledge. When the self becomes connected to nature, it begins to heal itself and remaps its external and internal terrains. The two nights spent by Ruth in the wilderness is a journey of self-affirmation in connection with nature. One can better understand who they are and where they belong by continually deepening their explorations and purging. Nature always offers hope and the ability to regenerate, as well as a setting where one can feel at ease with their sense of self and place. Ruth discovered her true self in connection with nature, just like Huckleberry Finn in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* (1899).

Water, land, and plant life provide a rich and ambiguous sense of place in Robinson's ecology's functioning in the American West. Her characters are firmly rooted in the land which opens up to the panorama of otherness which can never be fully incorporated. Woods, mountains, lakes, and the sky in the book *Housekeeping* are almost like characters. The lake, railroad track, houses, and nearby village in the novel *Housekeeping* are all reminiscent of *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau (1854). Martha Ravits, a critic, contends that *Housekeeping* adopts Thoreau's idea of achieving spiritual freedom through letting go of material possessions (Ravits: 664).

The lines between the outside and inside worlds begin to blur once Ruth's aunt Sylvie takes over housekeeping. Ruth says-'Sylvie in a house was more like a mermaid in a ship's cabin. She preferred [the house] sunk in the very element it was meant to exclude. We had crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, and sparrows in the attic' (*Housekeeping*: 99). Sylvie, unlike others, views housekeeping in a different light. For some people, a house is a place where people can be isolated from their natural surroundings and being protected, but Sylvie completely disagrees with this concept. There comes a point in the novel when the town of Fingerbone encounters flood and the water goes into the houses but Sylvie remains unbothered by this interruption of nature into their homegrown space and is seen happily dancing with Ruth. In this context Ruth further says-'Sylvie took me by the hands and pulled me after her through six grand waltz steps. The house flowed around us' (64).The transient Aunt Sylvie next welcomes the change in nature by shifting to her father's room which has

'glass double doors opening into the grape arbor, which was built against the house like a lean-to, and into the orchard. It was not a bright room, but in summer it was full of the smell of grass and earth and blossoms or fruit, and the sound of bees' (89). Thoreau in *Walden* writes that 'a taste for the beautiful is most cultivated out of doors, where there is no house and no housekeeper' (44). In a similar vein Sylvie kept the doors and windows opened after dusting the sofa in the orchard so that the old leaves and paper scraps can accumulate in the corners. This action of Sylvie shows how she defies conventional notions of a female housekeeper. After being witness to this incident Ruth says- 'Thus finely did our house become attuned to the orchard and the particularities of weather, even in the first days of Sylvie's housekeeping. Thus did she begin by littles and perhaps unawares to ready it for wasps and bats and barn swallows' (85).

We see a convergence of the domestic and natural worlds throughout the novel. Ruth's evocative descriptions of her natural environment hints at a kind of radiant interchange with the external world which aligns with Thoreau's notion of development away from anthropocentrism: '— an intensely pondered contemplation of characteristic images and events and gestures that take on a magical resonance now that the conditions of life have been simplified and the protagonist freed to appreciate how much more matters than what normally seems to matter' (153). Waldo Emerson a true transcendentalist considers nature to be a site of revival, rebirth and awakening which is always present to hold any person. The overpowering presence of the lake, which serves as a symbol of both death and a parallel life, exemplifies nature's spirituality in the novel. The bottom of lake appears to be alive and a viable alternative to Fingerbone's surface existence. The lake and the natural world in Finger bone Town appear to be infused with a different order of being:

The mountains, grayed and flattened by distance, looked like [...] the broken lip of an iron pot, just at a simmer, endlessly distilling water into light. But the lake at our feet was plain, clear water, bottomed with smooth stones or simple mud [...], as modest in its transformations of the ordinary as any puddle. Only the calm persistence with which the water touched, and touched, and touched, sifting all the little stones, jet, and white, and hazel, forced us to remember that the lake was vast, and in league with the moon. (*Housekeeping*: 112).

The extreme weather conditions in the town are a symbol of nature's immense power. Ruth says that 'the surface of the bay seemed almost viscous, membranous, and here things massed and accumulated, as they do in cobwebs or in the eaves and upswept corners of a house. It was a place of distinctly domestic disorder, warm and still and replete' (114). Almost every year the lake floods the town, plunging and demolishing human establishments. This can be interpreted as a purge or cleansing in which nature refutes its traditional roles just like Ruth and Sylvie in the novel *Housekeeping*. Further Ruth also mentions about the terrible sounds coming from the lake: 'From the lake came the increasingly terrific sounds of wrenching and ramming and slamming and upending, as a south flowing current heaped huge shards of ice against the north side of the bridge'(120). Ruth's action of collecting wild strawberries is a

symbol of her oneness with the natural world. The author expresses her desire to portray nature as an independent element by simulating descriptions of the seasons of spring, winter, and water flow in the environment.

In *Walden's* 'Conclusion' Thoreau anticipates resurrection and praises the hope and possibility of a new life. Ruth, similar to Thoreau likewise waited for rebirth. She considers the various layers of people, including her mother, as well as the things that are in the lake's bed, such as 'fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles, of neighbours and kin' (92) and thinks that 'Ascension seemed at such times a natural law. If one added to it a law of completion-that everything must finally be made comprehensible then ... What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?' (92) Ruth unfolds and finds solace and relief in the midst of nature. In his most lauded book, *Nature* (1836), Emerson discusses this phenomenon of becoming one with nature where he explains how a one-on-one encounter with the natural world allows one to have a glimpse of God's design. He views nature as a repository for profound and awe-inspiring meaning. Ruth's journey of self-declaration during the two nights she spends in the wilderness demonstrates her connectedness to nature.

Hence, we can say that the world of nature encourage explorations of consciousness. We can gain an understanding of the various perspectives on being in the world, our own selves, and the connection between Earth and a larger cosmic realm by developing an understanding of nature and its spiritual dimension. Nature is powerful, enigmatic, and mysterious. It's more than only a means for providing food and shelter rather it also has the potential to show who we are and shape our vision. In the novel Ruth enters the wilderness, the unsullied form of nature and discards away the cultural baggage and social norms to claim her autonomous self and be naturalized. Ruth approaches nature, the wilderness as her foster mother who would hold, guide and affirm her development of self.

Thus Robinson through her work promotes nature's rights to make us more aware of, appreciate, and, most importantly, respect our ecosystem, on which our lives depend completely. The novel *Housekeeping* advocates for the rights of nature making us understand and value our ecosystem on which our lives are completely dependent. We have created a gap between the two worlds by isolating humans from nature and as a result today modern man is alienated and we are facing environmental degradation. However, breaking away from certain socially established norms, practices, the prevailing culture, and existing beliefs is sometimes necessary in order to be true to one's own identity and self. The anthropocentric notion that nature is here only to cater human needs should be put down aside altogether and man and nature should be considered on equal. If we are able to achieve this common ground of equal footing we will establish a spiritual connection. Therefore, we human beings need to redefine our associations and bonds with nature and strive to cultivate a more spiritual and healthier connection with the natural world as well as man world.

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