
Housekeeping and The Other: a Psychological Development of Characters

In the novel *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, two sisters are drawn and held together through traumatic shifts in their caregivers. They value the dependability and mutual benefit offered by each other. In *The Other* by David Guterson, two “blood brothers” come together over shared interests and loss. They figure that two lonely people are better than one. Yet, on both accounts, the pair fails to withstand the test of time. Similar beginnings lead to disjoint conclusions, with one member of each pair moving away, into transience.

Ruth and Lucille in Robinson's narrative have a tough life, and strife often tends to bring people together. Following the untimely death of their mother, the two girls are routinely passed from caregiver to caregiver, none of whom met their needs. With no reliable home life to offer support, this duo is pushed to seek comfort and companionship solely in each other. As the girls' ties to the outside world weaken, their reliance on one another must become stronger. Initially, as they stroll through their small town of Fingerbone, where it is “[their] custom to prowl the dawn of any significant day”, they take in their surroundings and form opinions as though they were one person (Robinson 49). These two interpret their experiences as one strongly bonded unit rather than as two individuals. With such a deep connection, it is strange that Ruth and Lucille end up aspiring to almost polar opposite paths: Ruth leads the stray life of a transient while Lucille pursues conformity to her new middle school acquaintances. When did these two begin to drift apart? Does this separation occur gradually, or all at once?

The same uncertainty exists in John William and Neil's relationship in Guterson's story. While these two do not share an innate familial bond, as Lucille and Ruth do, they still belong to a kind of family. Both young men have lived through adolescence without their mothers and have fathers who show little interest in their lives and aspirations. This commonality results in both young men being regularly unsupervised and free to spend their time in each other's presence. Because of their familiarity with isolation and their surplus of free time, these two bond over long bouts with the wilderness and a common desire “to do battle with suffering itself” (Guterson 5). Because John William is determined and strong willed, Neil routinely finds himself “doing things John William want[s] to do... and not dropp[ing] out along the way” (Guterson 12). When connecting with John William brings him enjoyment or fulfillment instead of harm and condemnation, Neil willingly sticks by his side. As his friend becomes more set in his detrimental ways, however, Neil finds less appeal in involving himself because “in a friendship, you don't so much change terms as observe terms change” (Guterson 112). In this sense, the relationship at hand in *The Other* is more passively maintained than the bond between Lucille

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and Ruth. Either way, both relationships begin to disintegrate when Lucille and John William accept they are drawn to paths that will lead them astray from their once important companionships. Once again it is unclear why these polarizations exist, and the question endures as to whether a spur to new action or simply the pursuit of an existing trajectory took place.

Perhaps one's psychology is set in stone from an early age: progression through life could be predetermined and free from outside influence. On the other hand, significant life events could also be determinants of an individual's interior workings. With each as a viable explanation, Ruth and Lucille's parting could be destiny, or instead, the culmination of numerous events. The sisters face many defining moments together, and though these moments initially are experienced as one, the prose in the novel shifts, and their correspondence deteriorates. This discrepancy between the two grows as they mature, showing that the sisters are developing their own separate ideals. While it was once appropriate to view "Lucille and [Ruth] as a single consciousness", this strong similarity gives way to each member's need to prove they are not reliant upon the traits of another (Robinson 98). One clear dispute between the sisters is their evaluation of their ultimate caretaker, Sylvie. What begins as a shared joy at the prospect of being reared by their mother's sister soon becomes an irreconcilable disagreement between once inseparable parties. Sylvie's presence is not immediately detested by either sister, but Lucille is significantly less willing to stand for her aunt's abnormal antics than Ruth is. Lucille's lack of approval of Sylvie grows clear to Ruth and, even though she is not opposed to her new caretaker, she "finds...advantage in conforming [her] attitudes to" Lucille's (Robinson 93). Ruth is not willing to allow a divide in her only true relationship, and subdues her own ideals to maintain her sisterhood. This is only a temporary solution to a budding rift, however, as her efforts are contested by Lucille's tendency to "[see] in everything its potential for invidious change" (Robinson 93). When the two first begin drifting apart, inertia alone is able to hold the relationship somewhat steady. But this tendency to stick to habits is short lived. Each character's embodiment her respective interests prevails until Ruth sees that "Lucille's loyalties [are] with the other world" (Robinson 95).

A similar series of events also exists in *The Other*, when John William and Neil discover that the fruits of individuality triumph over the maintenance of a weakening connection. As mentioned, Neil associates with John William under the notion that it will not remove him from other societal ties. He enjoys John's company, but won't compromise himself to keep it. Following a week of isolation in the wilderness of the Pacific Northwest, Neil feels aligned with John William's view of the "organized social world as a pathetic illusion" (Guterson 35). With Neil identifying strongly with John William, he becomes momentarily removed from the world. This proves to be a temporary outlook though, and Neil overcomes this sense of futility to pursue an education while furthering his involvement in other social functions, like his budding relationship with Jamie. Neil values conformity, but this does not fully erase the comfort he finds in isolation. Yes,

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both characters draw great comfort from seclusion, but the reason that this state of being grants Neil gratification is quite different from the reason that it offers comfort to John William. Isolation is not a sustainable solution for Neil, as he “trie[s] to lov[e] [his] solitude” but finds it to be “a futile and self-conscious effort” (Guterson 145). What once came naturally in his friendship turns into something that requires deliberate effort to recreate. John William never transitions from this ideal, however, and this permanence of his character acts as the force that drives him from Neil and all those he once knew. Even more, this intrinsic value removes him so far from humanity that his only tie to society, Neil, “beg[ins] to realize how sad it is to see him...and find him yet again a little more devolved, a little more like one of those hominids [he’d] read about...[John] was so flagrantly absurd, so filthy...that he had to be a figment or a flashback. But he was real...sadly... because he seemed diminished and lacking in his prior fine luster” (Guterson 173). Like his enjoyment of getting stoned or spending endless hours in the woods, the appeal that John William’s sense of detachment and deviance has for Neil gradually erodes. While John is the one to undergo dramatic physical change, perhaps it is the realignment of Neil’s ideals that diminishes this relationship to periodic visits.

As both friends progress, Neil comes to identify a persona in John William that he can no longer relate to. And as Neil becomes more in touch with himself, at the University of Washington and with his fiancé, he learns the shape that he wishes his life and character to take. Likewise, Lucille easily finds a genuine connection with Ruth within the context of their meager living situation. When she is at this point, she is unaware of what more she could aspire towards. However, the inclusion of Sylvie in her life reveals to Lucille the helpless transient that she is destined to become should she passively remain with her sister. Her response is a concentrated effort in the direction of conformity and away from her sister, who is at ease following in her Aunt’s footsteps. These two novels, though unique in a multitude of ways, show that once flourishing companionships are prone to give way to the birth of individual identities. For an individual to actualize his or her true ideals, that individual must take a unique course, even if it results in the loss of someone who is reminiscent of a prior self.

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