

# [Environmental Imagination in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and *Lila*]

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**[Abstract]** *This article considers how the natural environment is represented in two novels by Marilynne Robinson and also references her non-fiction work. While Robinson is an outspoken advocate of various social causes in her essays and public speeches, environmental themes do not appear very frequently in her non-fiction texts. However, in her novels, and particularly in *Housekeeping* and *Lila*, nature a large role. These two novels have some significant connections, and yet they differ fundamentally in their environmental implications. This difference can be related to the difference between first- and second-wave ecocriticism.*

**[Keywords]** *Marilynne Robinson; environment; nature; wilderness; garden; ecocriticism*

At a time when the environmental crisis is becoming ever more pressing, the old question about the relevance of the arts and the humanities arises with a renewed poignancy. This ethical dilemma has long been addressed by a variety of scholars. In the field of American literature, Lawrence Buell has been one of the pioneers of ecocriticism, combining the study of literature with attention to the natural environment. Although Buell first focused on authors whose work traditionally belongs to the area of nature writing (Thoreau, for example), later in his career he looked for reflections on the environment, humans' relationship to the environment, or the role that the natural world plays also in texts which are set in the city or are concerned with issues of social injustice. He names just a few examples by way of illustration: "naturalist fiction, muckraking journalism, and the poetics of the urban *flâneur*" (*Writing* 8).<sup>1</sup>

This shift has taken place not only in the field of literature, but also in the field of environmental thought as such, and it has been described as a shift from first-wave to second-wave ecocriticism (see for example Hiltner or Buell *Future*; for a broader perspective see also Attfeld, particularly chapters 7-9). While first-wave ecocriticism focused generally on texts that foregrounded nature, such as Emerson's or Thoreau's works or Romantic poems, the emergence of so-called second-wave ecocriticism, starting roughly in the 1990's, has called attention to the environment in the broadest possible sense of the word, including urban settings or polluted areas, and taking into account the complexity of "setting" in its entirety, not separating the natural and the human but instead considering their co-existence and mutual influence.

The "apologetics" of literary scholarship in the age of environmental degradation has thus received a new impulse and a gained new dimension. Literature can be seen a site where the "power of imagination" can break through what Buell calls the "environmental unconscious" (*Writing* 8), "the limiting conditions of predictable, chronic perceptual underactivation in bringing to awareness, and then to articulation, of all that is to be noticed and expressed" (22). As an example of this environmental unconscious in literary scholarship, one might consider readings of *Moby Dick* which have not taken into account, as Buell points out, the prominence of the role of the ocean in the novel, or its exploration of interspecies links between animals and humans (*Writing* 205-214).

Although Marilynne Robinson is committed to various important causes of American society particularly in her non-fiction texts, she seems to be curiously silent about environmental issues.<sup>2</sup> As George Handley has commented, "Marilynne Robinson is an intriguing case for ecocriticism" (497). With just a few exceptions, Robinson does not explicitly write or talk about ecological concerns. These exceptions, moreover, are not recent; they date as far back as 1989 and 1998.<sup>3</sup> The first of these was a book-length exposure of dangerous leaks at the Sellafield nuclear plant on the coast of Cumbria, written at a time when Robinson lived in the UK: *Mother Country: Britain, the Welfare State and Nuclear Pollution*. Robinson wrote the book as a resentful reaction to the problems surrounding the plant as they were discussed in contemporary British media—or from her point of view, as they were belittled by the contemporary British media. She uncovers the problems of the plant and the negative impact the dangerous leaks have on the health of

the area's residents, but she also argues passionately against the British authorities that refused to face the problem. Written after her successful and highly acclaimed first novel *Housekeeping* (1980), Robinson's book on Sellafeld attracted both praise (it was nominated for the National Book Award for nonfiction) and criticism (including criticism by a Nobel laureate, the molecular biologist Max Perutz<sup>4</sup>).

In the following years, Robinson taught creative writing and did not publish any books until 1998, when a collection of her essays appeared under the title *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*. It is here that her second text addressing environmental issues appears: an essay entitled "Wilderness." Somewhat provocatively, Robinson argues that our primary concern should be with the problems of our societies. This is not to say, though, that she would disregard ecological problems; Robinson clearly believes in the importance of nature conservation, but she warns that the heart of the matter is elsewhere. It is not enough to try to save particular species or habitats if the source of their destruction remains operative—and the source, according to Robinson, is a "profound deterioration of community" ("Wilderness" 253). In this line of thinking, she claims that we must "invest our care and hope in civilization" ("Wilderness" 254). Underlying her argument here is her chief concern as a reform-minded, progressive thinker: we must find better ways of living together as humankind, and only then will we be able to stop damaging the natural environment.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, in both of her texts that are explicitly focused on ecological issues, it is the relationship of people to the natural world that Robinson is interested in primarily, rather than focusing on, for example, biodiversity, particular species or interspecies relationships within biomes. Her perspective is primarily ethical. The emphasis on human attitudes is important in Robinson's novels. All five of her novels could be examined from this angle, but in this article I limit my scope to two novels in which this theme is particularly prominent: *Housekeeping* (1980) and *Lila* (2014). These novels have strong literary connections. First of all, there are similarities between the main characters, as both *Housekeeping* and *Lila* focus on the figure of the female orphan and on female community. In *Housekeeping*, the sisters Ruth and Lucille are orphaned after the suicide of their mother and raised by female relatives: their widowed grandmother, their spinster great-aunts, and their aunt Sylvie, who, in the novel's present time, is single. In the other novel, the central character Lila is taken out of her home and raised by a female acquaintance, a single woman. Both books can be interpreted as bildungsromans in which the reader follows the development of the heroines from their childhood to adulthood. Both, too, have an open ending. The enigmatic ending of *Housekeeping* invites different interpretations, while the more conventional marriage plot of *Lila* also ends on a deliberately provisional, unfinished note, which contributes to the story's overall integrity and prevents a sentimentalized ending. Finally, most importantly for the focus of this paper, in these two novels the characters' relation to their surroundings plays an important role, and the settings of the stories are central to the development of the characters and the plot line itself.

This article considers the ways in which these two novels represent the natural setting and the characters' relation to it, pointing out an essential difference between them:

in *Housekeeping*, the natural world is depicted as a wilderness and a site of desire for a transcendental belonging, in which biological and physical human existence paradoxically becomes impossible (or nearly impossible). The natural world of *Lila*, in contrast, is the real, everyday environment in which humans live and from which they draw sustenance by their work in it; it is represented by the two contrasting settings, the scarcity of environmental degradation and the topos of the garden. Both novels challenge the stereotypical understanding of the natural world as simply other-than-human and separated from the human, but each novel approaches this conventional distinction from a different angle. The natural setting is most prominent in Robinson's first novel *Housekeeping*, set in a small town called Fingerbone, which is situated by a large lake and surrounded by mountains and yes, by wilderness—by uninhabited natural land, somewhere in Idaho (the location of Fingerbone is quite similar to that of Robinson's original hometown of Sandpoint, Idaho). The novel is permeated with a constant sense of the presence and power of nature, of the landscape of mountains and the great lake; contrasting with this is the unimportant town, as small and fragile as its name suggests, and the various shabby houses in which the characters find themselves.

This contrast between the natural world and the human sphere is one of the most prominent thematic and structural elements of the novel. The reader repeatedly finds that human dwellings are not secure and permanent shelters from the forces of nature. The most obvious example is Ruth and Lucille's house. Ruth and Lucille's grandmother provides a home for them after their mother Helen drives off a cliff. This is the house where Helen and her two sisters grew up; it was a place of safety, community and presence—yet even this safety and presence was constantly undermined by the family's trauma following the tragic death of the father. After Ruth and Lucille's grandmother dies, however, the seemingly stable boundary between house and nature is dissolved: the grandmother's predictable housekeeping, which acquires a ritual, sacramental dimension (or a way of coping with trauma, as Kelsie Donnelly argues in her Freudian reading of the novel's imagery) is replaced with a housekeeping of a very different, unsettling kind. Aunt Sylvie, who, before coming to care for the orphaned girls, spent her time roaming North America in freight cars, introduces a distinctly different relationship between the human world and the natural world, one in which the sense of contrast and a firm divide is constantly undermined. This change is ushered by a transformative flood upon her arrival, when water even enters Ruth and Lucille's house—although, as Ruth says, the grandmother “always boasted that the floods never reached our house” (*Housekeeping* 61).<sup>6</sup>

Sylvie, with an implicit nod to Emerson and Thoreau, has no desire to wall herself in and separate herself from the natural world. Her kind of housekeeping is in many ways the opposite of what is traditionally understood by the word: the effort to make one's house a neat and secure dwelling to protect human beings from the forces of nature, to keep it as a bulwark of humanity against the threatening non-human world. Sylvie upends this ideal by bringing nature inside the home and making the home a site where things simply silt up, as in nature: a mixture of dry leaves blown in from the outside through the

constantly opened doors and windows, and old magazines and empty cans, never removed. True to her name, Sylvie later takes Ruth to the woods and shows her a house in which this division has disappeared entirely: a ruin of an abandoned homestead, fully exposed to the weather and all the forces of nature, inhabited by imagined wild children.<sup>7</sup> Sylvie, who is always on the brink of leaving, who leaves the home for long hours to roam outside and who eats supper in the dark so as not to block the view outside through the windows, is someone who lives right at the limits of the human and the natural. Her vagrant lifestyle and existence is a mode of human dwelling in the world which undermines the notion that humans can be comfortably sheltered from the forces of nature.

This life at the limits is not only deeply unsettling in the eyes of their well-meaning neighbors; it is also dangerously close to death. Not long after her arrival, Ruth and Lucille find Sylvie poised precipitously over the lake on the railroad bridge, and they wonder if she is planning to jump. Later in the novel, after Lucille breaks away from them, Sylvie and Ruth spend the night on a “borrowed” boat on the lake, under the railroad bridge; when the train rides over their heads, it is a threatening experience, and yet Sylvie embraces the moment. Finally, and most importantly, when Sylvie and Ruth set their house on fire at the end of the novel and leave Fingerbone by crossing the railroad bridge, their escape is either literally their death, or very nearly so; in any case, the crossing of the bridge brings a transformation into a different kind of existence, one which is free of the domestic, and possibly also free of the body, depending on readers’ interpretation of the novel’s final pages.

Thus, Sylvie, and eventually Ruth with her (as she joins Sylvie, true to the biblical story evoked in her name), is a liminal character: she lives at the limits of the domestic and the natural, the safe and the dangerous, the stable and the decaying, opening up the traditional dualistic categories of common sense to new possibilities.<sup>8</sup> She seeks and creates environments in which the human exists within or in close proximity to the natural, even though this means danger or possibly death. *Housekeeping* imagines the contact between the human and the natural in terms of a marginal existence of the human. Part of this existence, in the world of the novel, is the acceptance of impermanence and death as an inseparable element of this undomesticated outlook on life, yielding to the overpowering force of the natural world.

In Robinson’s other novel, *Lila*, too, is a liminal character. She lives, literally, at the limits of society. The reader first meets Lila as a nameless young child, who has just been driven outside by an unfriendly voice and left at the doorstep of her unwelcoming home as evening falls—an opening scene which alludes to the expulsion from Paradise. In the night, a woman who calls herself Doll comes to Lila’s house and takes her away; she is a mother figure and Lila’s only friend. Together they make it through extreme poverty during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl storms. After Doll’s death, Lila, now an adult, ends up in a brothel in St Louis. She then works as a cleaning woman, and several years later she finds herself in rural Iowa, in the small community of Gilead where she encounters the pastor John Ames. What connects this very unlikely pair is their experi-

ence of abandonment: when Ames was young, his wife and baby both died in childbirth, and his life is marked by loneliness and the never-forgotten grief; this is something that Lila can relate to.

The liminality of the character of Lila is emphasized by the novel's motif of the threshold. It is the setting for the opening scene of the novel, with young Lila having been driven outside. Later on, when Doll gets separated from the migrant group, the other members put the child Lila on the doorstep of a church and go away; it is during the long time she spends on the church steps that she comes to fully realize her loneliness, and her relationship to Doll changes ("Lila wasn't the same to her after what happened while she was gone," *Lila* 69). When she first arrives in Gilead, she lives in a shack on the outskirts, at the threshold, as it were, of the town, and she only now and then ventures among people. Lila never quite moves out of her threshold existence: she lives in between and at the limits of isolation and community, self-reliance and dependence, toughness and vulnerability, shame and acceptance, and this tension is never resolved. Even as Ames' fiancée and wife, Lila is an alien element in the society of the town, and the good ladies from Ames' church try to help her fit in by bringing clothes and food. Lila accepts Ames' Protestant belief but never with full conviction; she is torn between her loyalty to Doll, who, Lila fears, can never be in heaven because she killed a man and because she only believed in herself, and her loyalty to Ames as she enjoys his love for her. Even when she marries Ames, settles into a comfortable house and becomes pregnant, she is unable to fully embrace the stability and security that open up for her for the first time in her life. Perhaps some day she might return to her solitary, vagrant life. And one day not too far in the future, as both she and Ames know, her marriage will end when Ames, the "old man," dies and leaves her and the child behind: for Lila, settled existence cannot but be temporary. She remains at the limits of the town's society, of the church, of belief itself, of her marriage. Lila lives in the tension between stability and insecurity, and although that dynamic is painful to her, she can do nothing to overcome it, nor does she even wish to overcome it: "it was her nature to feel that way, nothing she could change" (*Lila* 95).

Corresponding to the themes of belonging and isolation are the major environments of the novel. The first of these, associated with Lila's vagrant life with Doll, is the apocalyptic landscape of crowds of poor, displaced migrant workers, reminiscent of Steinbeck (though without his pathos). The natural world is almost absent from this landscape; it is a setting not really in a place but in the people's conditions. Lila's group is hardly ever situated geographically or topographically. The reader almost never knows what kind of landscape they are traveling through; there are only the immediate conditions of their particular situation, as if they moved largely in a vacuum, out of which only here and there a few details emerge: a fire, a stream, a few apples, a nameless street in a nameless town. The absence of the physical setting expresses the uprootedness of Lila and the migrants and intensifies the reader's impression of the migrants' desperate position at the margins of "respectable" society: not only can they not be settled in a place, but they are also denied any geographical identification of their desperate transience.<sup>9</sup>

Contrasted to this absence of the natural world and the apocalyptic setting are the major settings of the novel. When Doll first rescues Lila, they spend a number of weeks at a woman's place and work in the garden; the young Lila recovers from a fever which nearly killed her, and the relationship between her and Doll is consolidated. When Lila arrives in Gilead, she finds her first day-work helping someone weed their garden. As Lila's tentative relationship with Ames develops, she begins to work in his garden: "When she came there at first [to the Reverend's garden] to tend the roses and clean things up, she had made a little garden in a corner and planted a few potatoes, just for herself. A few beans" (*Lila* 16). She plants roses on the grave of Ames' first wife and baby and the Ames family, tending the grave as if it were a garden. When she stays in the abandoned shack outside the town, by the river, she catches fish and finds plants and berries, being provided for, in a way, at least before winter sets in, in this very modest version of a paradise. Lila and Ames' betrothal happens there too, and at the same time Ames baptizes Lila, filling up an old bucket with water from the river. Then they celebrate the moment by picking a few blackberries. A pastoral scene, a return to the Garden of Eden: "the two of them walked across the meadow, through the daisies and sunflowers, through an ash grove and into another fallow field. There were brambles along the farther side, weighed down with berries" (*Lila* 88).

The garden: a threshold again, a place at the limits of the human and natural spheres. In *Lila*, the topos of the garden is associated with the possibility of belonging and rootedness (an appropriate metaphor): "A garden never really belongs to somebody else if you're the one that takes care of it . . . Just brushing by the tomato plants, getting that musk on them, made her clothes seem clean" (*Lila* 221). The garden helps Lila find her own sense of belonging, and she even feels cleansed by being in the garden; shame is Lila's ever-present and all-pervasive emotion. Gardens, as a site of symbiosis of the human and the natural, offer the promise of restoration both to innocence and to belonging, to community, and they hint at the Edenic state when humans were called to "work and take care of" the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15).

In how Lila lives at the limits, she resembles Sylvie in *Housekeeping*. Sylvie too lives at the limits, staying in Fingerbone with her nieces but never quite at home, keeping house by opening it up to nature, and subverting ideas of human dwellings (and indeed of human existence) as stable and permanent. Yet there is a great difference between how the main heroines of *Housekeeping* and of *Lila* are situated in, and relate to, their environment. It can be described as a difference between understandings of the natural surroundings as "wilderness" or as "garden."

The wild nature of Fingerbone cannot be tamed or domesticated. The only beings that fully inhabit it are the dead: the dead in the lake, the imagined (dead) children at the abandoned homestead. When Ruth wishes to inhabit the wilderness, she can only experience it as a longing; the closest one can approach this goal is living at the limits of the domestic and the natural, like Sylvie. The dead are an alternative community; they have achieved unity with the natural world through their physical absence. As a community they are more desirable to Ruth than the living community of Fingerbone. At

the site of the abandoned homestead, Ruth wants to be part of this community of the absent; what stands in the way is her living body. This is how she expresses her longing: “Let them [the absent children] come unhouse me of this flesh, and pry this house apart. It was no shelter now, it only kept me here alone, and I would rather be with them” (*Housekeeping* 159). In her feminist reading of the novel, Anna Maguire Elliott comments on this passage: “Ruth’s body is now the ‘house’, the symbol of domesticity that must be torn down, freeing her spirit into the landscape with the other orphans” (111).<sup>10</sup> Connection with the absent community, the community of the dead, is also connection with the wild nature, for the dead have *become* wild nature. Wild nature is the home of the community of the absent people; only those who are dead can inhabit it, absent from the community of the living humans. Thus Ruth desires her own absence; because this is unattainable in life, she experiences absence at the level of longing. Without trying to read biographical elements into the novel, Robinson’s comment from her essay “Wilderness” is illustrative of the longing implicit in *Housekeeping*: “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*” (“Wilderness” 246; my emphasis). This element of yearning and desire points to the transcendental dimension of wild nature as it is represented in the novel: wilderness is most definitely beyond human limits; it transcends human life in scale, in power, in time, and to be able to fully experience wilderness, one would have to give up the limitations of the human body.

The longing to be a part of the natural world, which Sylvie and Ruth experience, is thus also a longing for transcendence. Such a longing is defined by abandoning one’s self, by crossing the boundary of human limitations. In fact, from the perspective of transcendence, the novel presents absence as, in a way, more real than presence. Physical presence is limiting; the desire for what is absent can be an even more powerful experience than the presence of the thing itself, as Ruth expresses it: “To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? . . . So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again” (*Housekeeping* 152-153). An intense desire for something absent makes the very thing present in a different, perhaps even more real, way. By this triad of absence-desire-transcendence the novel actually downplays presence, including physical existence and the body.<sup>11</sup>

This abandonment of the body is crucial in the novel’s ending, when Sylvie and Ruth escape Fingerbone to avoid their looming separation when the authorities threaten to take Ruth away from Sylvie. Wanting to stay together as an aunt-niece family, Sylvie and Ruth cross the railroad bridge and leave Fingerbone behind. To the people of Fingerbone, Ruth and Sylvie are dead. Depending on one’s interpretation, they either literally die crossing the bridge, or they are at least transformed into another kind of existence—vagrant, unrooted, one which connects absence and presence. They are, in



any case, absent: they are, and they are not—this is their achievement of absence. What remains is their longing for Lucille, who has rejected their approach to life, and yet, as Ruth imagines, longs for their presence none the less: “no one . . . could know how [Lucille’s] thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie” (*Housekeeping* 219).

*Housekeeping*’s persistent focus on absence and presence has inspired a range of interpretations. Some readings focus on trauma, such as Donnelly’s (mentioned above), and there are of course feminist readings, such as Maguire Elliott’s. Lisa Mendelman interprets the novel as a work of postmodern sentimentalism, while Mathew Potts reads the dynamic of loss/absence and memory/desire as a theological commentary on the sacraments: the binary between the real and the remembered is shown to be a “false choice” in the novel (494). As I have tried to show, the dynamic of absence and longing also exists between the self and the natural world, of which the longed-for dead are a part. Jonathan Arac and Susan Balée point out that absence and loss in *Housekeeping* have a sublime dimension (37).

Indeed, the perspective of the sublime, which has been one of the foundational concepts in Western understandings of wilderness since the 18th century, is relevant here. In his influential essay “The Trouble with Wilderness,” one of the milestones in the shift from first-wave to second-wave ecocriticism, William Cronon analyzes the evolution of Western thinking about wilderness, focusing particularly on the Romantic legacy with its emphasis on precisely the sublime aspect of our experience of nature. Cronon found this legacy to be still operative in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century understanding of wild nature (and one might add that it lingers even today). In the nineteenth century, nature writers such as William Wordsworth, H. D. Thoreau, or John Muir created an image of the wilderness as a site of sublime experience where man encounters the transcendental power of nature. Pristine nature, wilderness, is understood as the “true,” unspoiled nature, and this is the prerequisite for a sublime experience, an experience of a transcendental connection. This ideal of sublime wilderness, however, puts the natural world and humans at odds with each other, as Cronon argues:

No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us. . . . This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. . . . To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite places. (79-81)

One might then ask whether *Housekeeping*—with its combination of the themes of absence, longing, im/permanence, transcendence and its setting in the sublime landscape of mountains, woods, and a lake—actually perpetuates the self-nature dualism implied

in the Romantic understanding of wilderness, and perhaps the ancient dualism of mind and matter, which is also implied in it. The answer, indeed, seems to be *yes*. *Housekeeping* operates with the contrast between the domestic and the wild, and the human and the other-than-human. Lucille and the citizens of Fingerbone desire safety from the disturbing influences of the natural world, separation from its dead people, order instead of silt-ing, and permanence instead of change. For them, these elements of nature must be kept at bay: human life should not mix with the wilderness. Ruth desires an existence in the wilderness but experiences it as something unattainable, in the form of longing. Sylvie comes as close as possible to a unity with the natural world by living as a transient, dismantling the boundaries of domestic life—by being, in fact, almost absent in the living community. Furthermore, nature, as it appears in the novel, is all wild nature, sublime, powerful; it may enter into the domestic sphere and it may permeate it or overpower it, but it is not nature from which people take any physical sustenance. People are not depicted as dependent on their environment. Rather, nature is presented as an impersonal force and the site of the community of the absent for which Ruth longs. In connecting wild nature to a desire for transcendence, the novel indeed echoes the dualism implied in Romantic approaches to wilderness: just as wilderness cannot be where humans are, the self cannot be fully part of wild nature unless it relinquishes the physical body; the transcendental desire inherently implies an absence of the self.

In this respect, *Lila* differs significantly from *Housekeeping*. Instead of wilderness, gardens; instead of transcendent, disembodied longing, everyday work and care. In this novel, nature is, as Scott Hess calls it, an “everyday nature” (85-112), the ordinary environment of one’s everyday life. Sarah Churchwell has commented (before the publication of *Jack*, the fourth and last novel of the Gilead series) that each of the three Gilead novels can be read as representation of the three main Christian virtues: *Gilead* of faith, *Home* of hope, and *Lila* of charity (Churchwell, King, Bennett 14-15). The charity of *Lila* consists in practical care. In *Housekeeping*, very little work is done; the only character who draws sustenance from and works in her surroundings is the grandmother.<sup>12</sup> For Lila, on the other hand, care and work are modes of living. She herself experienced care as a life-giving principle: “Ugly old Doll. Who had said to her, Live. Not once, but every time she washed and mended for her, mothered her as if she were a child someone could want” (*Lila* 47). It is a mode of survival in her own life: what saves her and gives her strength to survive—and, eventually, to liberate herself from her miserable existence at the St. Louis brothel—is work. Work and acts of care characterize all of Lila’s adult existence. When she comes to Gilead, she starts to work in Ames’ garden. She tends the Ames family grave. She cares for a homeless boy who occupies her shack after her betrothal to Ames. She cares for the ageing Ames. She cares for her unborn son. She does all this without pathos, simply out of a deeply ingrained habit: scarcity, which she experienced in her life with Doll, has taught her to be pragmatic about survival and to make use of any good potential. When she planted vegetables for herself in a corner of Ames’s garden, it was because “she didn’t see any reason to let a sunny spot like that go to waste, and the soil was good” (*Housekeeping* 16). Caring for places and people is such good potential; to let

it go to waste would mean weakening one's chance to survive.<sup>13</sup> Lila thus embodies relational ethics, based on attentiveness and care, which extends to human and non-human subjects alike (see Krzywoszynska 3-5).

Anna Maguire Elliott reads *Housekeeping* as Robinson's engagement with the ideal of self-reliance and *Lila* as a restoration of the concept of mutual dependence and care: "These novels ask how, and whether, an Emersonian solitary connection to the landscape might be reconciled with a wider network of care, which recognizes human interdependence with each other as well as the wider, natural world" (104).<sup>14</sup> What Maguire Elliott identifies in the characters' attitudes is paralleled in how nature is depicted in the novels. In *Housekeeping*, it is depicted as an overpowering wilderness with the essentially Romantic dimensions of the sublime and its implicit dualism of the human and the natural; in *Lila*, it is depicted as an environment, as the very conditions and web of relationships which make human and non-human life possible, and as the site where humans are actually present, with all their physical and psychological needs and the work they do to make their life possible. Thus, *Lila* offers a different model for understanding the natural environment, one that highlights attentiveness and care and is closer to the present-day understanding of the reality of human presence on a more-than-human planet. Robinson's use of the garden in the novel both employs and transcends the literary topos. Through the character of Lila, the reader is presented with an example of a human attitude to the natural world which resonates with the arguments of those thinkers who, like Robinson in "Wilderness," face up to the fact that we live in a post-wild world and argue that in order for the natural world to thrive, humans must take care of it—must cultivate it, in the words of Emma Marris, as a "rambunctious" garden.

The two novels (and the argument could also be made for the remaining three) are connected by the topic of liminality, a dynamic at the limits of different spheres, but in each novel this perspective charts a different understanding of humans' relationship to the natural world. The main heroines—Ruth, Sylvie, and Lila—are all, in one way or another, characters at the limits. In *Housekeeping*, liminality is a (not-to-be-fulfilled) longing to overcome the division between man and nature (the latter understood as wilderness). Humans might desire to be a part of it, as Sylvie does and as Ruth does, but such unity cannot be fully attained in physical life. The most one can do is to live, like Sylvie, at the limits of what is "livable" for a human being. Full unity is only attainable through the loss of the physical body, through death and absence. The main character of *Lila* also lives at the limits—though not in the sense of mutually exclusive binaries, but limits as a symbiosis of two different elements, the human and the natural. Lila's liminal existence in the tension between individuality and community, between isolation and belonging, is reflected in the way in which her character is connected to the garden as a threshold site where the human and the natural are joined. *Lila*, more than *Housekeeping*, presents a setting in which the human and the natural actually co-exist, influencing one another, and where humans really do take sustenance from the natural world.

*Lila's* perspective on the natural world is thus closer to Robinson's argument in her essay "Wilderness"—and it is closer, too, to Cronon's sober comment that "idealizing

a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that we for better or worse call home” (21). Idealizing nature as distant wilderness leads, to return to Buell's phrase used at the beginning, to the “environmental unconscious” towards the real environment of our lives.<sup>15</sup> *Housekeeping* is a celebration of wilderness in the Romantic, idealizing tradition, where humans are lone intruders longing to experience a sublime, transcendental connection to the ungraspable, and nature is a site which is, by definition, devoid of human presence, if perhaps full of human absence. In this respect, the novel resembles the concerns of the first wave of environmental criticism, as an example of nature writing which examines humans' relationship to nature as wilderness.<sup>16</sup> *Lila* (together with Robinson's essay “Wilderness”) fits in more with second-wave ecocriticism, presenting a view of nature as the ever-present environment – *oikos*, the real home, setting, source and condition of human lives. It is a reflection of Robinson's achievement as a writer that she allows her readers to experience the beauty and appeal of both options, no matter how critical they might be of either of them.

## [Notes]

- 1 Lawrence Buell's earlier works focused on authors who were traditionally considered American “nature writers” (R. W. Emerson and H. D. Thoreau). Later, reflecting the shift in ecocritical thinking, Buell broadened his scope to include literature that considers nature and humans' relationship to it. Other literary genres and texts are also relevant from the environmental perspective, he argues, but readers have often been oblivious to the environmental dimensions of these other kinds.
- 2 She also explores important social issues in her fiction, particularly racial injustice and belief in American society; see for example Amy Hungerford's reading of Robinson in her book *Postmodern Belief*.
- 3 Robinson's reading of the creation story in her latest book, *Reading Genesis* (published in March 2024), focuses on the text as a theodicy and on the differences between the Hebrew creation myth and related ancient myths. Although Robinson pays attention to what the text says about the natural world, she does not draw any straightforward argument for environmental care from the first chapters of Genesis; other theologians have done so.
- 4 Perutz reviewed *Mother Country* in *The New York Review of Books* in an article “Is Britain ‘Befouled’?”, published on November 23, 1989; there followed an exchange between him and Robinson, in the issue of April 12, 1990. The exchange is available at <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/04/12/mother-country-an-exchange/>.
- 5 Robinson's sense of urgency in “Wilderness” is clear: “Those who are concerned about the world environment are, in my view, the abolitionists of this era, struggling to make an enlightened public aware that environmental depredation is an axe at the

root of every culture, every freedom, every value. There is no group in history I admire more than the abolitionists, but from their example I conclude that there are two questions we must always ask ourselves—what do we choose not to know, and what do we fail to anticipate? The ultimate success of the abolitionists so very much resembled failure that it requires charity, even more than discernment, to discover the difference. We must do better. Much more is at stake” (251).

- 6 The flood announces a change; even the town is said to be “strangely transformed” (*Housekeeping* 73).
- 7 One other house in the novel also represents this idea. Ruth and Lucille undergo a decisive experience when they linger too long by the lake and night falls. They decide to spend the night on the empty shore and build a primitive shelter with rocks and sticks, but their attempt to construct and inhabit this human dwelling is repeatedly thwarted. The roof keeps collapsing, and when Ruth wakes up in the middle of the night, she must dismantle it to be able to stand up. The shack is permeated with the absolute darkness of the night around them, and it does not shelter them from animals which they hear moving in close proximity. Ruth narrates: “Twice the roof fell. We had to sit with our chins in our knees to avoid bringing a wall down. . . . I woke up in absolute darkness. . . . I scrambled out through the roof and over the wall into darkness no less absolute. . . . then [Lucille] sat down beside me in our ruined stronghold, never still, never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun” (*Housekeeping* 114-115). This “house,” too, is depicted as falling apart, insecure, and impermanent. For Ruth, this experience is an important step in becoming more like Sylvie; for Lucille, it is the turning point after which she deliberately directs her life in an opposite way.
- 8 This understanding of liminality grows out of the work of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner; see K. M. Ashley and Robert Daly.
- 9 Seemingly very different, and yet not unrelated to this vacuum-like setting, is the St. Louis brothel where Lila lives and works for a period of time. During her time there, the reader never sees Lila outdoors; she stays inside the building as if in a prison, as if there was no outside world at all. This again emphasizes Lila’s sense of uprootedness and non-belonging; she hates the place and feels she does not belong there. Her life there goes against her very self.
- 10 This is of course a topic for a feminist reading of the novel, but it is important to realize that it is Lucille, and not Ruth, who changes physically in the course of the novel, transitioning from physical childhood to womanhood. Ruth’s body is depicted as clumsy, awkward, and devoid of feminine features. Her desire to be “disembodied” and to be united with the dead and with the natural world is thus also connected to this dimension of never growing to physical maturity.
- 11 The one exception is the physical presence of a family. “It is a terrible thing to break up a family,” says Ruth (190), and she realizes that Sylvie wants her to be physically present with her, to stay together as a family. “Sylvie did not want to lose me. . . . She did not wish to remember me. She much preferred my simple, ordinary presence,

- silent and ungainly though I might be" (*Housekeeping* 195). And yet this physical closeness of a family is possible, for Ruth and Sylvie, only in their absence from Fingerbone.
- 12 Unlike Ruth and Sylvie with their desire for an out-of-body existence, the grandmother is a character who is rooted in her environment. She inhabits the domestic sphere fully, entirely, without regret, and she even experiences moments when the domestic is expanded to a transcendental level. The reader sees her working in the yard and performing various chores around the house, and these activities are given the dimension of spiritual practice and transcendental insight. Ruth imagines her grandmother experiencing such an epiphany, a transformed vision of the ordinary, as she digs potatoes one summer evening when the sky is the "dark blue of ashes": "She burrowed her hand under a potato plant and felt gingerly for the new potatoes under their dry net of roots, smooth as eggs. She put them in her apron and walked back to the house thinking. What have I seen, what have I seen. The earth and the sky and the garden, not as they always are" (*Housekeeping* 19). Such moments of epiphany are also inscribed into the framework of absence and presence. This particular moment comes in a part of the chapter which describes how the death of the grandfather, Edmund, affected his wife and daughters; his absence made their mutual presence all the more desirable and palpable.
- 13 It is true that in *Housekeeping*, Sylvie too cares for the girls, and eventually Sylvie and Ruth are left to care for each other, but Sylvie experiences care as tension between her love for her nieces and her strong desire to be free of domestic bonds. Although ultimately she and Ruth become companions, they are companions in their (probably) out-of-body, or nearly-out-of-body, existence, in any case a transient existence free of permanent ties or everyday care.
- 14 Lila's lesson, Maguire Elliott argues, is to unlearn independence and accept the need to be cared for, as well as to care (116-118). Other readings of *Lila*, from different perspectives, which I have also found useful, are for example those of Kathryn Ludwig (from the perspective of the religious/the secular) or Lucy Clarke (focusing on grief and bereavement).
- 15 Cronon's essay "The Trouble with Wilderness" was published three years before Robinson's essay "Wilderness," and although Robinson never mentions Cronon in her text and the thrust of the essay is considerably different (Cronon's is an analysis of the concept of wilderness in the history of British and American thought, Robinson's is a reflection on the conditions for the very possibility of environmental activism), her perspective is not unrelated to Cronon's argument against a dualism of self and nature. Cronon invites readers to re-assess wilderness as simply all nature, all environment around us, and to be aware of and appreciative of nature as wilderness even in our immediate surroundings. Robinson's call for reform is articulated in more general words, but she seems to build on the same criticism of the idea of wilderness as somehow apart from, and better than, civilization.
- 16 George Handley's comprehensive analysis of Robinson's position on ecocriticism would deserve more attention than the scope of this article allows.

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