

The presentation of loss through Ruth, in the novel *Housekeeping*.

The novel *Housekeeping*, published over 30 years ago, received both popular and critical approval for its touching depiction of a relationship between two sisters who deal with unbelievable loss and tragedy in their lives. The abandonment and absence illustrated in the novel demonstrates the fragility of human relationships, and is noteworthy not only because of the lyricism of its prose, but also for its stark presentation of loneliness. Loss, which is pervasive in Ruth's life, seemingly causes absence from her and the text, creating a 'transparent eyeball' narrative that defines the novels tone.

'My name is Ruth'¹ is the decidedly detached first sentence of this novel, and not only sets the tone of separation from the reader within it, but also sets the underlying motif of religious references. In the Bible, Ruth is a woman who when widowed, refuses to leave her mother-in-law because of her love for her. This sentence is remarkably alike to the first sentence of *Moby Dick*; 'Call. me. Ishmael'² however the stark comparisons between these sentences that help analyse the separation from the reader and Ruth. The first line of *Moby Dick* implies a 'you'; an audience which creates a monologue because it invites a dialogue. The first sentence of *Housekeeping* tells the reader what we should call Ruth; it is the way one would talk to a stranger. This simple, declarative sentence makes Ruth an object of contemplation within the novel, and no dialogue is formed between Ruth and the reader. In the Bible Ruth is known as a humble woman, who, by marrying Boaz becomes the great grandmother of King David, and therefore is in the direct line of Jesus' family. She is a character who is identified as a stranger to the family of Jesus, but someone who is also very central. It is no coincidence that this religious name is Ruth's name; Ruth follows Sylvie into the unmitigated wandering, just as her biblical counterpart Ruth does with her mother in law Naomi. Ruth has also lost her

¹ Robinson, M., *Housekeeping* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2005) p.3 All further references will be given in the body of the text.

² Melville, H., *Moby Dick* (London: Vintage Books, 2007) p.1