I would like to discuss some of the philosophical implications the novel presents. More specifically, its apparent commentary on social contract theory and Thomas Hobbes’s concept of the state of nature. The novel certainly establishes a stark dichotomy between insiders and outsiders. Where the insiders are those who participate in the social contract and find themselves at ease with the status quo. The outsiders of course are the antithesis of this: those who ignore the social contract and are not at ease with the status quo.

I find that this novel functions at least somewhat as a commentary on social contract theory because of the manner in which it aligns these two polarities. The insiders, with their obscured and limited view (obscured to the outsiders, and limited to their own perspectives) foil the outsiders who can see everything from afar and choose to remain in this position. Here, the insiders, the social contract signees, interoperate within their own comfortable world. There is a societal cushion here, at the cost of compliance to authority. The outsiders however, have chosen to decline the social contract. Thus, they are free from the status quo and its authority, yet they remain in a state if nature, or transience.

For Thomas Hobbes, the state of nature is equated to a state of war where humans are in perpetual competition and participating in a society is our salvation from this hostile environment. I will venture to say that Robinson’s novel certainly contests the brutality of the state of nature. Calling it transience, she calls on Biblical rhetoric to establish an environment where she can present the reasons why a person might prefer to live in a state of nature versus a state.

In this vein, the Biblical language contained in the novel perpetuates a theme from Ecclesiastes: that nothing *really* matters. Said to be one of the more depressing books in the Bible at face value, the book of Ecclesiastes in relation to the rest of the Bible presents a liberating concept; human creations, wealth, and all material things really are temporal, including the human corpus. So, while the novel certainly criticizes the idea of the status quo and, well organization and things that we would arguably equate as the establishment or Bible inspired, it offers at least a discussion of Biblical applications and virtues for a transient lifestyle. This, I believe is where the novel’s genius finds its locus. It is counter cultural by reasserting Biblical ideas. It never claims that one method of living, insider or outsider, is the best, but it serves to present support for marginalized ideas and realign our ideas of living in the state of nature. For some people, it probably doesn’t suit their personality, but for Sylvie and Ruth, it made a lot of sense where the insider world did not.

Even if this was not Robinson’s goal in writing *Housekeeping*, the novel’s navigation of these concepts provides groundwork for exploring them further. The nature of the dichotomy between insiders and outsiders includes with it implications that a world constructed based on what we see is often shallow and ignores the depth at which our other senses manifest reality. I think this is the philosophical prowess of Sylvie’s transience. Her world view is holistic and thus she bears witness to more than what meets the eye which contradicts the worldview of any insider such as Lucille. This tension is felt throughout the novel as the townspeople become more invested in Ruth’s assimilation into the insider group as she becomes more transcendental as per Sylvie’s influence. The cathartic moment of the novel appears to be when Ruth “converts” and begins to see the virtues of transience. But this leaves me unsatisfied as there is no entertainment of the idea that one could have a foot in both pools (insider and outsider) and navigate between the two at their pleasure. Nor does it postulate that no person is fully an insider or fully an outsider but one falls on a spectrum of insider-ness to outsider-ness (perhaps this becomes too political). For myself, satisfaction would be found in a balance between being inside and outside. For, would it not facilitate understanding and tolerating other individuals if we all had knowledge and experience that suffices both being an insider and an outsider? If we took it upon ourselves to learn about those that are most different from ourselves. Perhaps I am idealizing this dichotomy; realistically it is not so black and white. But the novel certainly does not leave me feeling this way.