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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion and Writing Activities



Robinson announces the central theme of the book in the title: *Housekeeping*. The theme is known from the outset, but her treatment of it quickly transcends all ordinary associations with the concept. The novel might be described as a meditation on the meaning of housekeeping, from its most ordinary aspects to its farthest metaphorical potential: How does one make a home in the world? Explore this theme through the following questions and exercises:

1. What does housekeeping mean to Grandmother Sylvia? What advice does she offer the girls (Example: "Sell the orchards," p. 27)? How do Lily and Nona view their housekeeping responsibilities?
2. Review the descriptions of Sylvie's housekeeping (including pp. 84–85, 99–103, and 180–181). Have students create a collective list of her housekeeping habits.
3. Discuss: How do Sylvie's habits differ from traditional ideas of housekeeping? What sort of meals does she prefer (p. 87)? How does she disregard the traditional boundaries between indoors and outdoors? Why? What insight can the reader gain about Sylvie's housekeeping from the stories she tells? How do the rituals of housekeeping relate to the keeping and nurturing of family and family bonds? How does the author feel about the human project of "keeping house" in a world where all living things perish eventually?
4. Work with students to create a list of other themes in the novel (for example, abandonment, loneliness, and transience). Have students choose one theme and write a short essay describing how one or more characters express this theme in words and actions. Students should support their ideas with examples from the text.



Homework

Read Chapters 10 and 11 (pp. 192–219). Why can Ruth no longer imagine going into the house (p. 203)? What insights does Ruth have in the orchard? Why do Ruth and Sylvie set the house on fire? What is Ruth's answer to her own question: "When did I become so unlike other people?" (p. 214).