

Slipping into the Dark: Death as a Means of Discovery in Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and
Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

By

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This thesis compares and contrasts Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* to explore how Mexican and American cultures perceive death. By examining the thoughts and actions of the young protagonists through the lens of the uncanny, it becomes obvious that they are searching for a history that has been repressed by society. In *Pedro Páramo*, Juan Preciado learns to accept the ghosts who populate his hometown in order to understand his own repressed history. Ruth, the protagonist in *Housekeeping*, yearns to be closer to her deceased mother and escapes her repressed society by becoming a transient. Though their plots are similar, each book varies in the way that death is repressed and how the characters come to accept death. While culture dictates that these feelings of closeness towards the dead should remain hidden, the characters struggle to bring them into the open to challenge conceptions of a reality constructed by society.

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the collection of Oregon State University. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request. I also affirm that the work represented in this thesis is my own work.

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Si en todas partes estás,
en el agua, en la tierra,
en el aire que me encierra
y en el incendio voraz
y si a todas partes vas

conmigo en el pensamiento,
en el soplo de mi aliento
y en mi sangre confundida,
¿no serás, Muerte, en mi vida,
agua, fuego, polvo y viento?

-Xavier Villaurrutia

If you are everywhere:
in water and earth,
in the air that holds me,
and in the voracious blaze;
and if you go every place

with me in my thought,
in the sigh of my breath,
and in my confused blood,
are you not, Death, in my life,
water, fire, dust, and wind?

1. INTRODUCTION

The expression “to give up the ghost” dates back to at least the 14th century and refers to the moment of death when, in a final exhale, the body “gives up” the ghost or spirit (OED). This expression is proof of the belief that the ghost (or spirit) and body are separated at the moment of death. Despite recognition of this double-being, when we say somebody dies we usually mean his or her physical body. While we rightly mourn the loss of the tangible part of a person’s existence, many people make presumptions about where the spirit has gone and doubt that it is still in contact with the physical world of the living.

In Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny”, he explains that societies often repress any connections we may have with the dead because death is associated with fear. When this fear breaks through society’s grip to manifest itself in our lives, Freud would say we are experiencing an uncanny moment. A personal and intimate feeling, the uncanny is present whenever something “that was intended to remain secret, hidden away...has come into the open” (Freud 132). Embedded in the idea of the uncanny is the sensation that something

once familiar has been repressed and, through events that may seem strange or frightening, what has been repressed can come to light to be remembered or discussed.

To understand a person's concept of the connection between the dead and the living it is crucial to look at the culture that influenced their beliefs. In an examination of different cultural views on death, Richard Kalish states that each different culture or society "has developed roles, beliefs, values, ceremonies, and rituals to integrate death and the process of dying into the culture as a whole and to help individuals cope with the mysteries and fears of death" (iii). For the purposes of this thesis, this discussion will focus on how the cultures of Mexico and the United States allow people to conceptualize death and how these cultural beliefs can actually suppress a connection with the dead.

Further examination of the uncanny sheds light on how culture is responsible for this repression. In his essay, Freud states, "...An uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary..." (Freud 150). While death is not a fantasy, it is something that culture represses based upon an association with fear. When the reality of death rises up through a culture that tries to repress it, an uncanny effect occurs.

In American culture, people attempt to put death as far from their minds as possible because death forces us to confront negative feelings of suffering and loss. In his essay, "Death Shall Have No Dominion: The Passing of the World of the Dead in America", Charles Jackson claims, "In this century, at least for Americans, connection between the world of the dead and that of the living has been largely severed and the dead world is disappearing" (47). He blames this loss on "urbanization, mobility, and demographic change" which have weakened the contact between the living and the dead (Jackson 50). In pursuit of the

American Dream, Americans have learned to only look forward by putting loss and decay behind them.

In Mexico however, the dead “are not forgotten or excluded from recollections, prayers, or holidays because they are no longer visible,” states Juanita Garciagodoy in *Digging the Days of the Dead* (3). *Días de Muerto*, or Days of the Dead, is a traditional Mexican holiday that honors the dead with a celebration. With papier-mâché skeletons and candy skulls, death seems to be an icon of Mexican culture. In *Death and the Idea of Mexico*, Claudio Lomnitz explains that an “awareness of an only very tenuously shared sense of a *future*...led intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century to elevate Death to the state of a *national sign*” (21). After centuries of colonization and cultural oppression, a depleted relationship with the dead came to signify a vaguely shaped future. In Mexico, the idea of death was not repressed through cultural means, but instead obscured as traditional ways of life were lost (Garciagodoy 3). Even though the dead are commonly accepted, those same forces of urbanization and mobility still work to keep tradition and history buried in Mexican culture.

In order to unearth their traditions, histories, and relationships with the dead, individuals must slip through the constraints of society into the darkness of what lies beyond. In Juan Rulfo’s 1955 novel *Pedro Páramo*, a son searches for a father he never knew, but the only people he encounters are spirits, inhabitants of the town that his father mercilessly destroyed. Published 25 years later in a different time and place, Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping* recounts the story of a young girl trying to understand her place within her family and society as she is haunted by memories of her dead mother and other relatives. In both *Pedro Páramo* and *Housekeeping*, the narrators seek to understand

the significance of their memories of the dead in a world that, by imposing a different definition of reality, continually tries to repress death and loss.

These stories present us with two children who, plagued by memories of their dead mothers, struggle to understand the ways in which the dead affect the living. There are two towns, one overrun by death and the other living in the shadow of death, where both death and loss seek to unearth themselves from society's constraints. While these two novels were written in different cultural contexts, both present a narrator's struggle to confront their own memory in order to accept death and thereby uncover a piece of history, both personal and communal.

These books contain similar themes that contribute additional insights into two different cultures' perceptions of death and dying. This thesis will explore what these characters uncover about themselves and their families when they accept the presence of death. Comparing these themes will provide further understanding of the ways that culture can change the way we conceptualize and accept death.

2. BACKGROUND

Before delving into how these novels lend themselves to a cross-cultural understanding of death, it is important to locate these authors in their distinctive cultural contexts in early 20th century Mexico and the late 20th century in the United States.

2.1 Juan Rulfo

From early on in his life, Juan Rulfo, the author of *Pedro Páramo*, was privy to dramatic and startling changes, both in the history of Mexico and in his own family. Born in 1917 in the state of Jalisco, Mexico, Rulfo heard stories about the fighting in the Revolution during the first part of the century and, during his childhood, he endured the repercussions of the changes (Leal 70). Violent gangs, men who wanted to continue fighting after the battles were over, roamed the countryside to loot and murder at will (Poniatowska 9). These gangs were responsible for the murder of Rulfo's father (when Rulfo was six) and two uncles. Four years after the death of his father, Rulfo lost his mother and the following year his grandmother passed away. Along with these losses, Rulfo also experienced the death of his grandfather and yet another uncle. "Between 1922 and 1930," Rulfo stated, "I knew only death" (qtd. in Benitez 18). Between the ages of four to twelve, he lost nearly everyone who was close to him.

Rulfo not only faced death in his own family, but also witnessed the passing of many fellow countrymen. The constitution drawn up during the Revolution, the Constitution of 1917, included certain religious restrictions on the church that severely limited the clergy's involvement in politics. The church lost its right to own lands, which became property of the

state (Leal 6). A violent uprising of Catholic priests, known as the Cristero Revolt, began under President Álvaro Obregón. In 1926, under President Plutarco, the violence escalated and in 1928, as the priests suffered tremendous losses, a peace agreement was reached. (Huck 95). Rulfo's home state of Jalisco was one of the major areas of conflict during the Cristero war and the guerrilla warfare was brutal. Rulfo remembers the bodies of dead priests left hanging on telephone posts throughout towns:

They stayed there until they became old and they curled up like untanned leather.... And since they hung them very high, there they would sway in the breeze many days, sometimes months, sometimes only the tatters of their pants billowing out with the wind as if someone had put them out to dry there. (Poniatowska 10)

Adding more disorder to an already chaotic countryside, the Cristero Revolt decimated populations and further engrained images of death in Rulfo's thoughts. The stories of the Revolution, the Cristero Revolt, and the deaths of his close family members influenced Rulfo's writing, as illustrated by the death and violence that permeates his fiction (Leal 73).

As the fighting escalated, a priest left his library of confiscated books in the house of Rulfo's grandmother for safekeeping (Rulfo qtd. in Leal 70). At ten years old, Rulfo devoured "Dumas, Victor Hugo, Dick Turpin, [and] books about Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull" (Poniatowska 10). In those formative years, Rulfo's passion for literature took root.

Critics and writers regard Rulfo's works as not only exceptional among Latin American letters, but among the best in world literature. Although a fragment of an unfinished novel dates to 1940, he did not publish his first stories until 1945. In 1953, he published his celebrated collection of short stories titled *El llano en llamas* [The burning plain] and two years later *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo's first novel, was released. *El llano en llamas* consists of seventeen short stories about life in the countryside in Jalisco, including the story

“Luvina” which some consider a precursor to *Pedro Páramo*. This collection showcases some of Rulfo’s key stylistic and thematic elements such as a collapsed time structure, overarching themes of death and loss, and narratives set against the backdrop of a declining countryside (Leal 23, 73; Anderson 2002). After *Pedro Páramo*, Rulfo worked on various film scripts and adaptations of his novels and in 1980, he published a second novel titled *El gallo de oro*. Although his works were few and far between, they inspired a new generation of Latin American writers.

Lesser known but just as essential in understanding Rulfo are his photographs. Of over 6,000 photographs Rulfo took while traveling through Mexico for work, only a fraction have been released. With an interest in the architecture of his home country (nearly half of his photos are of architecture), Rulfo captured a post-Revolution countryside in tatters, with crumbling homes and bullet-riddled walls as well as still-standing Mayan and Aztec structures (Rulfo “Inframundo”). His photos also show a Mexican landscape of dry plains, shrubby valleys, and looming mountains. While his stories focus on death, many of his photos are portraits of daily life: playing music, fetching water from a well, or leading cows on a hillside trail. Rulfo’s photos provide visual reference for the landscape of his fiction but, unlike his darker fiction, his images tell a more celebratory story than his words.

2.2 Marilynne Robinson

Marilynne Robinson, author of *Housekeeping*, was born in 1947 in Sandpoint, Idaho, a small town that served as the switching yard for three railroads. Robinson’s own grandfather, like her protagonist Ruth’s, traveled west on a train and became the root from which his family grew (Schaub 1994). Despite the fundamental presence of her grandfather,

Robinson remarked that the women in her family were “enormously important...and powerful figures” (Shaub 1994). After spending her childhood in Sandpoint, Robinson traveled to the east coast for her undergraduate degree and returned to the Northwest to pursue her Ph.D. While studying American literature at University of Washington, Robinson began to write down metaphors to better understand how writers used the device in their works. These metaphors “cohered in a way that [she] hadn’t expected” and from those exercises came her first novel, *Housekeeping* (Fay 2008). After the stunning critical reception of *Housekeeping* in 1980, Robinson became known as a highly regarded writer.

In *Housekeeping*, Robinson’s own background is powerfully represented, as is her reverence for the natural world, and there is a strong thread of Biblical metaphor and structure. She has stated, “When I was writing *Housekeeping*, one of the things that I was aware of it as being was a novel about the West, in the sense that that's the part of the country where I grew up and my family has lived for a long time” (Schaub 1994). The American West, in Robinson’s writing, is a place of solitude, toughness, and piety. As Ruth struggles to cast off the limitations placed on her by the self-described civilization of the small town of Fingerbone, she exemplifies these trademark Western qualities in her solitary toughness. In addition, the ideal of progress exemplified by Westward Expansion symbolized an American desire for freedom and mobility. Robinson uses the American west and its ideas of exploration as a backdrop for her novel.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Robinson says that she must know “the narrative” of a place before living there (Brookes 2009). She finds that many people bury or shrug off the narrative of the place where they live. This failure to remember or acknowledge history is seen in Fingerbone’s attempt to look forward and cast off tarnished memories of the past. In another interview, Robinson comments on the same lack of interest for personal histories

when she says, “There is at present a dearth of humane imagination for the integrity and mystery of other lives” (Robinson “Night Thoughts”). In her mind, many individuals lack any interest in, or compassion for, the people around them. For Robinson’s character Ruth, it is exactly this curiosity and yearning for knowledge that drives her to protect her past from a society bent on taking it from her.

Like Ruth, Robinson tends to look at the larger scope of things to understand her own place in the world and often looks to spirituality for answers. “[Religion] talks about the arc of life and the quality of experience in ways that I’ve found fruitful to think about,” she has stated, “Religion has been profoundly effective in enlarging human imagination and expression” (Fay 2008). In *Housekeeping*, the timeless stories of the Bible help Ruth see her place in the world through another lens. “The holy is at the origins of everything that exists,” Robinson offers as an explanation for the larger presence she felt as a child growing up (Abernethy 2009). Robinson is a Protestant, but draws on a range of philosophical and spiritual sources to help shape her beliefs (Abernethy 2009). In one interview, she reveals that her favorite book is the Bible, followed in second by *Moby Dick* (Schaub 1994). In another interview, she explains, “The first obligation of religion is to maintain the sense of the value of human beings” (Fay 2008). Her statements about her own religious values make it clear that Robinson finds guidance and insight from her own brand of spirituality.

3. METHODS

The next sections of this paper will discuss the actions of the protagonists in each novel. This examination attempts to trace the arc of the characters' thoughts on death to see how they change throughout their journeys. Chapter 4 discusses *Pedro Páramo* by using quotes and close reading to show how Juan learns to accept death as a means to uncover both his family's history and the history of Comala. Using the same techniques, chapter 5 examines *Housekeeping* for similar moments of growth and change in Ruth's journey to break free of the cultural constraints of Fingerbone. The section on *Housekeeping* refers back to *Pedro Páramo* in order to compare and contrast the protagonists' relationships with the world of the dead.

These discussions pinpoint moments of the uncanny in each novel by using both Freud's 1919 essay and Nicholas Royle's 2003 book *The Uncanny* as textual references. Freud wrote his essay "The Uncanny" from the viewpoint of a psychoanalyst and attempts to explain the ways in which "our own and our culture's disowned past...haunts us" (Haughton xlii). His examination does not focus only on culture but instead takes a linguistic, literary, and personal approach to understand the many different qualities of fear and anxiety. The essay itself is a type of search and Freud never comes to a conclusive answer about the reason that some fear feels different from others. Royle's book adds to the discussion of the uncanny with a historical examination of the concept as well as applied readings in various disciplines.

This paper references Freud and Royle's articulations of the uncanny in relation to specific moments when a character's actions or thoughts exemplify fear, anxiety, repression, or an uncovering of their past. Using the lens of the uncanny to look at these actions will not

only add an understanding of how these characters bring to light a history that society associates with fear, but also help locate the source of societal repression of the idea of death. While culture imposes a belief that feelings of closeness towards the dead should remain hidden, Ruth and Juan manage to bring them into the open to challenge conceptions of a reality constructed by society.

“...que busca? Tal vez busca su destino. Tal vez su destino es buscar.”

“...what is he searching for? Perhaps he searches for his destiny. Perhaps his destiny is to search.”

— Octavio Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*

4. *Pedro Páramo*

Widely regarded as a milestone in Mexican literature, Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* reimagines Mexican culture and history through a narrative that describes the events of an eerily different world. The novel begins with a dying mother's request to her son, Juan Preciado, to journey to their hometown of Comala to reconcile with Pedro Páramo, Juan's father who abandoned him at birth. In fragments and flashbacks, Rulfo reveals the slow decline and eventual death of Comala and its residents at the hands Pedro Páramo.

As the major landowner in town, Pedro Páramo rules over the townspeople by controlling access to their lands and therefore their livelihoods. When the love of his life, Susana San Juan, dies, Páramo lets the land lie fallow. Comala was once a town that “smelled of spilled honey” with green hills and rolling wheat fields, but Pedro Páramo allows the earth to die as vengeance on the people of Comala (18).

Throughout the novel, characters refer to Pedro Páramo as “unmitigated evil” and “living bile” (6, 84). It is only when he dies that Comala is relinquished from his heartless clutches. Páramo's life ends when one of his illegitimate sons stabs him to death, as a means to end his father's cycle of greed. Pedro Páramo falls to the ground like a “collapsed pile of rocks” (124). Alan Bell writes that “the disintegrating image of Pedro Páramo represent[s] forward progress in time and new hope for Mexico” (239). As Páramo's body

falls like a crumbling structure, the sun rises once again over the desolate lands of Comala. “The sun was tumbling over things, giving them form once again” (123). In a continuation of the cycle, Páramo’s decomposition allows for the rebirth and reshaping of Comala. Although new light dawns on Comala, it is too late because there is nobody left. Those who fled Rulfo’s fictional Comala would have looked for a better life in the growing cities.

After the Mexican Revolution, centralized industry began to grow in Mexico City and towns all over the countryside were deserted. People abandoned their communities not only to escape the tyranny of rural landowners, but also to flee the Cristero Revolt and other violent uprisings. In their exodus, “they seemed to forget” about Comala (81). The modernization of Mexico and violence in the countryside caused people to reject their old way of life. “The traditional world of rural Mexico, folk Catholicism, and oral tales gradually receded beyond the horizon for the rapidly urbanizing Mexico of the 1950s” (Anderson 2002). In pursuit of modernity, the people of rural Mexico had little choice but to reject their old traditions and adapt to an urban life. Soon these traditions were all but forgotten, buried with the victims of violent revolts in the countryside. To tell the tale of this abandoned land, Juan Rulfo has no choice but to populate Comala with the spirits of the dead, because they are the only remnant of the forgotten culture.

This ghost town is not the Comala that Juan knows. Everything that Juan knows about Comala comes from his mother's stories. The way she described the vibrant smells and colors reflects the early days of Comala and gives shape to the rural town in his imagination. As her dying wish, Juan's mother tells him to visit Comala to find his father. At first, Juan does not think he will go, but his imagination takes hold. “Little by little I began to build a world around a hope centered on this man called Pedro Páramo, the man who had been my

mother's husband" (3). As he thinks about the Comala he will find, Juan envisions a town rooted in his mother's nostalgia and hopes to find his father.

On the road to Comala, Juan sinks into a "pure, airless heat" and feels that something is not right (5). His traveling companion, a burro driver named Abundio tells Juan, "The town sits on the coals of the earth, at the very mouth of hell" (6). Unbeknownst to Juan, Abundio is not only his half-brother but also the man who killed Pedro Páramo and is now a ghost that haunts the hell-like countryside. Juan's initial impression of Comala as some sort of gateway to Hell stands in stark contrast to the picturesque village of his mother's stories.

This blurring between the image in his head and the reality in front of him is an uncanny experience for Juan. To him, it seems as though his mother hid the truth about the real Comala. In his essay, Freud muses that the uncanny is something familiar and "homely", but "the negative prefix un- is the indicator of repression" (151). Juan's mother most likely told her son everything she knew about Comala, but she was only able to tell him the repressed version of the history because that is all she knows. The discord between the history he knows of Comala and the reality in front of him shows that the history of the town has been repressed.

Although the town and the landscape seem dead, Juan resists the reality in front of him and refuses to let it overtake the Comala of his imagination. "...Though there were no children playing, no doves...I felt that the town was alive" (8). Juan continues to operate under the same hope that brought him to Comala in the first place, despite the hints that something is missing from Comala. From the beginning, Juan's expectations of what he will uncover seem naive, but he continues to follow his mother's memories and his promise to find his father. Through her memories, Juan's mother convinced (and continues to remind) him that Comala is a place he should consider home.

The voices Juan begins to hear shortly after he arrives in Comala, along with the continual renewal of his mother through memory, only enhance the sense of the familiar and homelike that Juan feels in Comala. Almost presciently, as if she knew he would need reassurance of her presence, Juan recalls his mother's words: "You will hear the voice of my memories stronger than the voice of my death..." (8). Although we cannot know the influence of Juan's mother on her son before her death, it is clear that the closer Juan moves to this imagined reality the more powerful his memories of her become.

In addition to hearing his mother's voice, Juan meets the spirits of the dead who haunt the town. Even after he realizes that he is speaking with the dead, Juan feels that what these spirits teach him is relevant to his journey. Benjamin Cluff writes, "Rulfo's entire novel is an exercise in abiding with and learning from specters" (Cluff 9). By listening to what these spirits have to say, Juan is able to uncover the repressed version of Comala's history that only the dead know. The first spirit he encounters is Eduviges Dyada, a woman who eerily knows Juan and claims she spoke to his mother that same day. "My mother is dead," Juan explains, to which Eduviges calmly replies, "So that was why her voice sounded so weak, like it had to travel a long distance to get here. Now I understand" (10). Juan is taken aback by Eduviges' apparent ability to communicate with the dead, but for him it is not a preposterous idea. Juan seems calmed by the idea that his mother and other dead people do not exist in memory alone. Talking to Eduviges brings back the Comala of his imagination.

By telling Juan about two of her own communications with spirits and letting him know that he probably had a visitation of his own, Eduviges shows Juan that the dead do not live only in memory but can actually move back and forth between the worlds of the living and dead. Her understanding of this relationship harkens back to *Días de muerto* and the traditional Mexican belief that even though their bodies may be dead, spirits still maintain a

connection to the physical world of the living. She explains to Juan that the man who led him into town could not possibly be Abundio because that man died years ago. As before, the news that he was talking with a ghost does not alarm Juan.

As Eduvigés tells Juan about Miguel Páramo's ghost who came to visit her after he died and a horse she hears galloping across the plains, it becomes clear that she knows the history of Comala but only through her experience with death. Eduvigés claims this ability to communicate with the dead is her sixth sense, "A gift God gave me – or maybe a curse. All I know is that I've suffered because of it" (21). Eduvigés is forced to relive Comala's past as one of the few remaining spirits who can remember it. While the rest of the town left, she remained and now suffers for her knowledge of the past.

Another spirit comes to visit Juan during the night and is able to further show Juan what happened to Comala. Damiana Cisneros, a woman who took care of Juan when he was young, comes to take Juan back to where she lives. She asks Juan how he got into the room where he was sleeping because there is no key to the door. When Juan tells her Eduvigés let him in, Damiana replies, "Poor Eduvigés. That must mean she's still wandering like a lost soul" (33). Juan does not seem distressed that the woman he had just heard so many stories from is not among the living. Juan does not immediately recognize that Damiana is a spirit as well because, at this point, he does not know that *all* the inhabitants of Comala are dead.

While Eduvigés showed Juan that ghosts now haunt Comala, Damiana shows Juan that he is not the only one haunted by memories of a time when the town was alive. Through her stories, Juan learns that there is no need to be afraid when hallucinations seem like reality. "This town is filled with echoes," she tells him, "I'm not afraid anymore. ...On windy days I see the wind blowing leaves from the trees, when anyone can see that there aren't

any trees here” (42). The leaves blowing from the trees are echoes of a Comala filled with life, which Damiana projects on the reality of a lifeless Comala. Damiana is sensing two different worlds: one filled with echoes and another that is not. As Juan ventures deeper into Comala, he adds layers to the picture he created from his mother’s nostalgia by uncovering the history of the town and his family.

Given the interconnected nature of the worlds of the dead and living, it is not surprising that Damiana Cisneros departs very quickly from Juan’s life. Juan shows his first hints of skepticism about who is dead and who is alive, and he demands, “Are you alive, Damiana? Tell me, Damiana!” (43) After being reassured that he should not be afraid of the echoes, Juan finds himself alone in the streets, calling out Damiana’s name although she is no longer with him. “The echo replied: ‘...ana...neros! ...ana...neros!’” (43). Juan does not yet understand how to tell the difference between the living and the dead, but from Damiana he finds out that what he thinks is in front of him is not necessarily there. While Eduviges experienced the connection between the dead and the living through haunting spirits, for Damiana the link was an overlay of her own memory on top of the world she was actually experiencing. Damiana remembered the leaves and the trees from when she was alive, but now, as a spirit wandering through the town she used to live in, she has to reconcile her memories of the past with the dead town of the present.

While his experience with Damiana helps illustrate Eduviges’ lesson from earlier, the story of the leaves and the trees teaches Juan something more. Damiana is the first to show Juan that he is not the only one haunted by the uncanny blur between fantasy or memory and reality. Later, after his own death, Juan refers back to Damiana’s examples of blowing leaves. He explains the discord between his perceived world and reality “like the sound of the wind through the branches of a tree at night when you can’t see the tree or the branches

but you hear the whispering” (59). Juan can hear the wind, but because he cannot see the tree that is causing the sound, he is not sure he hears anything at all. In death, Juan understands the frightening experience that occurs when there is a discrepancy between feeling and reality.

After Damiana disappears, memories from Comala’s repressed past begin to haunt Juan. Disembodied voices seep into his mind. Posed in the narration as fragments, these voices seem to be coming from the other side of a door. In all of the conversations, the figure of Pedro Páramo as an adulterer and land baron is still alive. In one conversation, two women talk about narrowly avoiding becoming “girls for don Pedro” (43). In another, a man claims that he did not sell his land to Pedro Páramo while another voice tells him Páramo will take the land anyway (44). These haunting voices are the first direct glimpses Juan gets of the town’s past. Since he has not encountered any living people in Comala, he must listen to these voices if he wants to learn anything about his father.

Even as he tries to resist the voices, Juan begins to experience a dual world of his own. As he watches oxen-drawn carts creak by in the streets, he flashes back to a story his mother told him. “[The carts] come from everywhere, loaded with niter, ears of corn, and fodder. The wheels creak and groan until the windows rattle and wake the people inside” (46). Now able to tell the difference between his reality and a memory projected on that reality, Juan knows these carts are not there. “Empty carts, churning the silence of the streets. Fading into the dark road of night. And shadows. The echo of shadows” (46). When Juan first came to Comala, he was disappointed because all he saw was a town lacking any characteristics of his mother’s memories. As Juan begins to overlay these memories on the reality in front of him, he sees that his mother’s stories were truthful but only gave him a

partial history. After encounters with Eduviges and Damiana though, it is clear that Juan can expand his knowledge of Comala by listening to the dead.

When he first arrived in Comala, he brushed off the voices in his head, thinking, “...If I heard only silence, it was because I was not yet accustomed to silence – maybe because my head was still filled with sounds and voices” (8). Before understanding the relationship between his memories and reality, Juan did not know how to interpret the voices in his head. In the abandoned town, he expected to hear nothing, to live in silence, but instead the voices in his head grew even clearer. Now that he understands the impact his memories have on the world around him, Juan can acknowledge the importance of these voices.

By engaging with the haunting spirits, Juan is able to make Comala familiar once again as he begins to bring to light the history that was previously a secret. The spirits “can be interpreted as evidence of a historical trauma that occurred in Comala” and Juan uncovers the long-familiar past by listening to what the dead have to say (Cluff 48). This uncanny revelation comes when Juan he realizes that the words he hears now have a different quality and feel somehow closer than before. As the dawn breaks, Juan listens carefully to the sounds he hears:

From time to time I heard the sound of words, and marked a difference.
Because until then, I realized, the words I had heard had been silent. There had been no sound, I had sensed them. But silently, the way you hear words in your dreams. (47)

By accepting and understanding the relationship between the world of the dead and the world of the living, Juan understands now that the voices he hears are *both* inside his head and outside. Instead of seeing a discord between the town of his mother’s memories and the world in front of him, Juan now senses that the voices of the dead are acting as a means to inform him about the repressed past.

While Juan is getting closer to his original goal of finding his father, in reality, as he moves further into Comala and continues hearing voices, he near his demise. This progression towards understanding the stories of the dead helps Juan understand his family's history in a way that his mother's memories could not. Although they startle him at first, he grows accustomed to the spirits and recognizes they are his only way to discern the connection between past and present.

Just before he dies, Juan's close proximity to the world of the dead allows him to talk with his mother. In the novel, the conversation is set apart, similar to the haunting voices that Juan heard previously. "Don't you hear me?" Juan asks his mother. "Where are you?" she replies. Disheartened, Juan answers, "I'm here, in your village. With your people. Don't you see me?" (56). By asking this question, Juan demonstrates his knowledge of the overlapping between the worlds of the dead and the living. Whereas before he thought his memories would only live inside his head, he now moves beyond his previous conceptions of life and death to ask his mother whether she is present and able to see him.

Juan continues the conversation with his mother and believes he will be rewarded with her presence. "Her voice seemed all-encompassing. It faded into distant space. 'I don't see you'" (57). Despite all the clues that tell him that his mother should be able to visit him and his world just like any of the other spirits who slip so easily back and forth, Juan realizes that there is still a divide between them. This is the first time Juan has communicated with his mother since her death and, even though he is working to fulfill his promise to her, she is not able to accompany him on his journey as other spirits have. Juan's mother was able to communicate with Eduvigés, but even between these two spirits there was a distant quality to her voice (10). Although he does not express it, it seems that the Juan believes only way to get closer to his mother is to slip into the world of the dead.

While he has come so far in understanding what happened to his family and to Comala, Juan must figure out one last piece of the puzzle before he can accomplish his goal. After an invitation into her house, Juan falls asleep next to a woman. In the middle of the night, Juan wakes up drenched in sweat, “The woman’s body was made of earth, layered in crusts of earth...It was crumbling, melting into a pool of mud” (57). At first, it is hard to tell whether this is a dream or not. The tension that occurs between Juan’s reality and his imagination is indicative of the uncanny. However, Juan is not only feeling the same uncertainty he felt before, but also an “extreme nostalgia or ‘homesickness’” (Royle 2). Nicholas Royle argues that this longing is also entwined with the uncanny. Juan’s description of the mud of the woman’s body signals “a compulsion to return to an inorganic state” (Royle 2). Juan’s desire to return to his mother and the familiarity of his home gives him an incentive to die.

Surrounded by the mud of the woman’s body and the stifling heat of Comala, Juan begins having trouble breathing. “There was no air; only the dead, still night.... Not a breath. I had to suck in the same air I exhaled, cupping it in my hands before it escaped” (57). As Juan moves closer to his own death, it seems that nature turns against him to quicken his trajectory to the grave. For Juan, suffocation is unavoidable; he cannot breathe in the dirt of the woman’s body and he cannot find enough heated air to fill his lungs. The heat presses in on all sides, unable to breathe, Juan drowns in the air the same way he would drown in dirt as if he were buried underground. Nicholas Royle explains that “being buried alive is “being committed to the earth not because you are dead but because you *appear to be dead*” (143). Juan is the only living person in the town, but his communication with spirits and perceived desire to be dead make it seem as though he is already of the other world. Comala, as a town of the dead, conspires to keep Juan there as a spirit.

As Juan struggles to catch his breath, he feels the air of his world quickly receding. “I felt it, in and out, less each time...until it was so thin it slipped through my fingers forever. I mean, forever” (57). As he is buried alive in air, one cannot help but think that death will enable Juan to return to his mother. Freud discussed the link between live burial and return to the mother in his essay on the uncanny. While some believe that the most frightening instance of the uncanny is being buried alive, Freud would argue that this “terrifying fantasy is merely a variant of another...the fantasy of living in the womb” (150). While he bases his interpretation on the viewpoint of psychoanalysis, Freud’s text makes the link between the manner in which Juan died and his desire to die. From a brief conversation between mother and son, it is clear that Juan needs his mother’s influence and, when he dies, the suffocation and being pushed in from all sides reflects his underlying desire to return to his mother.

While the description of Juan’s death makes it sound as though he drowned in the stifling heat, his description of the event adds yet another factor. From the grave, Juan explains the events of his death to Dorotea, the woman who is buried inside the same tomb as him. “I went to the plaza...I was drawn there by the sound of people; I thought there were real people” (58). While he did not reveal his fear before, Juan’s uncertainty about who is alive and who is dead finally drove him crazy. In the plaza he heard, “human voices: not clear, but secretive voices that seemed to be whispering something...” (59). Juan found comfort in his mother’s nostalgia but the spirits he hears in Comala present him with a reality uninhibited by repression. This reality, while strange, represents the truth about Comala.

As he discusses his own death with Dorotea, Juan recalls another conversation with his mother, “There you’ll find the place I love most in the world ... You’ll see why a person

would want to live there forever” (58). In an interview, Juan Rulfo said of his characters, “Their ancestors tie them to the place. They don’t want to leave their dead” (Leal 73). Juan’s return to Comala is not only based on the promise he made to his mother but also an attempt to return to the place that was most like home for him. By remembering this in the middle of an explanation about his own death, it seems as though Juan believes that his mother sent him to die in Comala and subsequently live there forever.

In dying, Juan is able to access the full extent of Comala’s past. While he never meets his father, Juan can finally listen to the voices of Comala (without having to question his own sanity) and understand what they teach him about the history of the town and his father. When the inhabitants of Comala died, they took the history of the town with them and created a town that seemingly had no story. If he had not died, Juan would have been privy to the limited information shared with him by the haunting spirits of Comala but, by dying, he gains a deeper understanding of the repressed history of the town and his father.

After Juan dies he begins to understand the history of Comala, Pedro Páramo’s love for Susana San Juan, and how Pedro Páramo eventually let the town fall into ruin. Dorotea tells Juan the most about his past. She acts as a “ghostly repository or witness of Comala’s recent past” (Cluff 9). Through these stories, Juan is finally able to recognize why the Comala he experienced felt so unfamiliar compared with the cherished memories of his mother. By dying, Juan is able to get closer to the Comala that his mother and father experienced.

Buried in the cemetery with Dorotea, Juan listens to the other dead as they wake up and begin reminiscing about their lives. Both he and Dorotea are transfixed by the story of Susana San Juan, Pedro Páramo’s childhood love who was driven mad by her fixation on death. “It must be that woman who talks to herself,” Dorotea explains to Juan as they listen the woman’s murmurings through the soil, “The one in the large tomb. Doña Susanita...The

damp must have got to her, and she's moving around in her sleep" (78). Listening, they learn about Susana's love for her dead husband, memories of her mother's death, and a longing for her childhood in Comala when there was life and abundance.

Freud's musings on the uncanny rest on the idea that "the term 'uncanny' (*unheimlich*) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away and has come into the open" (132). Whether they "intended" it or not, generations of Mexicans who fled the countryside for big cities hid away their true history. From the grave, Juan learns about the multitude of deaths in Comala, as well as his father's cruelty and the role Susana San Juan played in the town's ultimate downfall. Moaning in his nearby grave, a man tells the story of when Pedro Páramo murdered all the attendants of a wedding because somebody there had murdered his father (79). Juan learns that many men also died fighting in the Cristero War, but the true downfall of the town began when, after Pedro Páramo attempted to win her love, Susana San Juan died (81). Dorotea explains how Pedro Páramo "lost interest in everything. He let his lands lie fallow, and gave orders for the tools that worked it to be destroyed" (80). For Juan, both the history of the town and his own journey come full circle when he learns that his father's desire for vengeance led to the death of Comala. His imagined version of the town was incomplete because it was based on a repressed version of history. By listening to the dead Juan is able to bring to light information that was meant to stay hidden and make the reality in front of him meet up with the vision inside his head.

In his book on the uncanny, Nicholas Royle writes "to be in the company of ghosts is not necessarily a cause for fear or panic. It is something to affirm: it is the very condition of thinking and feeling" (53). Although Juan initially resists the reality of the ghost town, he eventually accepts these spirits as a means to uncover the repressed history that he yearns

to hear. He engages with the dead of Comala and, by listening to their stories, he learns that his mother's stories were merely a nostalgic idea of Comala.

When Dorotea asks him why he came here, Juan replies, "I told you that at the very beginning. I came to find Pedro Páramo, who they say was my father. Hope brought me here" (60). Although Juan came to Comala to learn solely about his father, he ends up uncovering the entire history of the town. Cluff contends that "if it weren't for his imaginations, Juan wouldn't have gone to Comala" (32). Juan started out with a picture of Comala based on an incomplete version of history, but by following his hope and imagination, he brings to light the darker history of the Mexican countryside.

“Dr. Everard, what prescriptions have you for young ladies who take to ghost-seeing?”

- Mary Glead Tuttiett a.k.a. Maxwell Gray, *The Silence of Dean Maitland*

5. *Housekeeping*

In Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, the narrator Ruth is cripplingly haunted by memories of her dead family members. Ruth's grandfather died when his train derailed and plunged to the bottom of Fingerbone Lake. Ruth's mother left Ruth and her younger sister Lucille waiting at their grandmother's house as she "sailed" off the edge of a cliff into the same lake (23). After five years as their guardian, their grandmother "eschewed awakening" one morning and, once again, death left the girls in its wake (29).

Ruth tries to make peace with her memories as she attempts to resolve the discord between tangible artifacts of the dead and the memories she holds in her head that manifest themselves in the world around her. Ruth and Lucille differ in their attempts to reconcile themselves to the loss of their mother. Lucille, tired of Ruth as her only company, slowly replaces her sister with the comfort of a social life and a society that represses its fear of loss. Ruth, in contrast, searches for ways to leave that society's constraints behind. While Juan's quest to learn about his family and Comala propels him towards death, Ruth turns to a life of transiency that leaves her dead to society that struggles to keep her housed. This new way of being, she discovers, allows her to forget corporeal constraints and live in a world full of her private and sublime memories.

As she tries to understand her memories of the dead, Ruth feels stifled by a society that is determined to repress them. Freud writes, "So-called educated people have officially

ceased to believe that the dead can become visible as spirits” and, as such, society creates the atmosphere necessary for the reemergence of the dead to seem uncanny (154). Just as Juan must accept death in order to uncover his own repressed history, Ruth realizes she must find a way to keep the memories of the dead alive in a society where a connection with the dead is not valued.

As she struggles to understand the function of those memories that create a connection with the dead, Ruth feels increasingly distanced from both her sister Lucille and a society that values constant renewal and shuns the act of remembering –especially of tragedy and loss. To help her on her quest, Ruth relies on her aunt Sylvie, a transient who comes to take care of the girls. While Sylvie is supposed to act as a protector, her tendency to wander seems to overshadow her role as a traditional mother figure and housekeeper. While Lucille rejects Sylvie’s transiency, Ruth sees the spiritual benefits of a life outside social convention, particularly women’s domestic roles. As Ruth tries to understand the memories she has of her mother and the other dead, she increasingly finds that her thoughts and memories hold more meaning than the artifacts these people left behind. Whereas death was Juan’s way to uncover his history and meld his mother’s memories with reality, Ruth uses transiency as a means to break with society and reveal the value of her own memories.

When Ruth and Lucille learn that Sylvie is coming to Fingerbone to be their guardian, they hope she will act like the mother they were unjustly denied. Just as Juan imagined Comala would be just like his mother’s stories, the girls expect Sylvie to be a familiar figure because she lived in Fingerbone, in the same house, when she was a child. Ruth explains that she and Lucille “began to hope, if unawares, that a substantial restitution was about to

be made” (42). The girls expect Sylvie, as their mother’s sister, to both provide them with the guidance they did not get from their mother and help them understand who their mother was. As with Juan, the girls have a hope that they will find someone who will be able to provide them with answers about a suppressed history.

After only a few days of living with Sylvie, the girls realize that she cannot help them uncover the information they want to know. As they sit around the kitchen table, Lucille suddenly asks Sylvie to tell them about their mother. “The question was abrupt, and the tone of it was coaxing, because adults did not wish to speak to us about our mother” (50). Lucille attempts to access a history that societal rules are determined to repress and, although she has tried this same line of questioning before to no avail, this time she expects a different response. Lucille sees Sylvie as a last hope for understanding her mother, but again she is disappointed with the answer. After attempting to relate a meaningful story, Sylvie answers, “It’s hard to describe someone you know so well” (51). Although Sylvie understands the girls’ mother, she does not know how to share her stories with her nieces.

While Lucille is unsatisfied, Ruth is surprised and sees Sylvie’s response as a reflection of her own thinking. “It is, as she said, difficult to describe someone, since memories are by their nature fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary...” (53). In her mind, Ruth understands Sylvie’s uncertainty in much the same way she interprets her own thoughts on the dead. Ruth knows that she and Sylvie do not view their memories the same way most people do. As Juan Preciado is comforted by conversation with Eduviges, so is Ruth comforted to hear that she is not the only one for whom memories have special significance. While both Juan and Ruth need community as they work to uncover their repressed histories, Juan sees his similarity to the dead and Ruth begins to identify with her transient aunt.

Early in the novel, Ruth begins to see a physical similarity between her mother and her aunt. Staring at her aunt, Ruth notices “there was such a similarity in fact...that Sylvie began to blur the memory of my mother and then displace it” (53). As with Juan, Ruth’s memories begin to project themselves on the reality around her; as she searches for something, her memories help her make it real. For Ruth, it is of the utmost importance that her memories are untarnished by outside influences. If these memories are lost, then she feels the history of her family—and of all those lost to the waters of Fingerbone Lake—will be lost as well.

The significance of memories also appears when Ruth describes the effects of her grandmother’s death. Ruth imagines that her grandmother “had entered into some other element upon which our lives floated as weightless, intangible, immiscible, and inseparable as reflections in water” (41). Ruth places her grandmother and all of the dead together in a separate world which does not mix with the world of the living but instead seems to support it. She feels her grandmother had been relegated “into the undifferentiated past” (41). Ruth believes that in death, all the separate histories become one and, because society does not like to dwell on the past, individual stories become indistinguishable. In contrast to the support Juan receives from the spirits of Comala, Fingerbone’s society actually hinders Ruth as she searches for closeness with her family. While Juan’s cultural values allow for an overlap between the world of the dead and the living, Ruth initially sees these worlds as separate places. It is only a belief in the value of memory that allows Ruth to break away from society and establish a connection with the deceased. All Ruth has left of her family are memories and she believes it is crucial to keep their memories distinct in order to show recognition of her history.

Soon after Sylvie takes over the family home, Fingerbone Lake floods as it does every year and the water invades their home. The townspeople try to go about their lives as normally as possible, but for Ruth the waters bring a strong sense of the dead into her home. She is constantly pulled by the memory of her family members who are interred in the lake. After describing her grandfather's watery burial in the train wreck, Ruth commented that even when it is not flooding Fingerbone, the lake still haunts the minds of the townspeople. "It is true that one is always aware of the lake in Fingerbone, or the deeps of the lake, the lightless, airless waters below" (9). In *Pedro Páramo*, the world of the dead seemed to present an exact copy of the world of the living. For Ruth, the depths of the lake act as a double world that not only stores the physical bodies, but the spirits of the dead as well. In the lake, "things massed and accumulated, as they do in cobwebs...and unswept corners of a house. It was a place of distinctly domestic disorder..." (113). The lake is at once domestic and something wild, as if in its consumption of people and houses, the lake has become an ancestral house.

As the floodwaters invade her house, Ruth begins to take notice of the artifacts that float above the surface. "So Fingerbone, or such relics of it as showed about the mirroring waters, seemed fragments of the quotidian held up to our wondering attention, offered somehow as proof of their own significance" (74). What the flood brings to light seems of little importance to Ruth because what she yearns to attain, a strengthened understanding of the dead, is not part of this world. She muses, "Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable..." (73). From Ruth's point of view, the living are just spirits who spend time in the world, only to leave everything behind when they die and move on to the next. In his essay "Border Crossings in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*", William Burke comments that, "Those who trust in the objects of sight as stable signifiers of

reality are entrapped in the solipsistic boundaries of the senses” (720). For Ruth, this entrapment of the senses that seems to keep the world of the living separate from the world of the dead. As she tries to figure out how to strengthen her connection with her dead family, she feels the tangible objects of this world serve exclusively to tarnish the only memories she has left.

Although Ruth feels a strange familiarity towards Sylvie, she continues to look to Lucille for guidance on how she should interpret the world around her. One afternoon, the girls catch Sylvie walking out across the railroad bridge over the lake. When Sylvie returns to the shore, Lucille interrogates her about her actions and, scared of losing another mother figure, says, “If you fell in, everyone would think you did it on purpose...Even us” (82). Ruth plays no part in the interrogation but afterwards speaks in the first-person plural to explain her and Lucille’s reaction to Sylvie’s transience. “We were very upset...Clearly our aunt was not a stable person” (82). By speaking as “we”, Ruth shows that, at least in this moment, she shares Lucille’s thinking that they should watch out for their aunt.

Despite this common goal, Ruth is concerned for Sylvie’s well-being for different reasons than Lucille. Curious again about Sylvie’s way of exploring the world, Ruth imagines Sylvie taking her trip across the bridge a step further by disappearing into the lake as the rest of her family has done. The imagined journey continues as Sylvie returns from death and the bottom of the lake saying, “I’ve always wondered what that would be like” (84). While nobody else she know seems to have the faintest interest in the dead, Ruth feels that Sylvie, through her transiency, is disconnected enough from society that she can explore her curiosities about the dead. Ruth feels an urge to understand her own connection with the dead, but Lucille keeps her firmly grounded inside society.

Lucille becomes increasingly compelled by society's norms and Ruth feels the distance growing between her and her sister. As they sit around the kitchen table in the dark, Lucille, who has always been averse to Sylvie's habit of keeping the lights off, suddenly reaches up and turns on the light. Chipped paint, soot stains, and stacks of magazines reveal themselves as evidence of Sylvie's hopeless housekeeping skills. The light gives Lucille reason to discuss her shame for Sylvie and her hatred of transiency. In her essay "The pleasures and perils of merging: female subjectivity in Marilynne Robinson's 'Housekeeping'", Karen Kaivola notes that by revealing the kitchen, Lucille is able to make her sister see "Sylvie's way of keeping house as the world would see it" (10). For Lucille, conventions of society are important and her aunt and sister's way of living offends her "sense of propriety" (103). She does not feel swayed to dwell on her past and instead adapts the forward-looking attitude of the rest of Fingerbone.

For Ruth, the light uncovers something completely different. "...The cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone before as this world from the primal darkness" (100). Ruth is "startled and uncomfortable" in the light as she is forced to confront something familiar that she tried to deny had been there all along (101). Juan talks about this same kind of awareness in the end of *Pedro Páramo*. He discusses the uncanny feeling that comes in the dark when you can hear the wind in the trees but, because you cannot see the trees, you cannot be sure they are truly there. Juan would feel at ease knowing the tree is there and that his mind reflects reality, but Ruth would rather let the tangible reality slip away and rely only on her memory and senses.

After a night in the woods, Ruth experiences her first slip towards a world in which memory and sense reign supreme. After a day in the woods, Ruth and Lucille decide to create a makeshift house and spend the night. Searching for a way to escape the material

world, Ruth “...simply let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in [her] skull and bowels and bones” (116). This desire to extend beyond the limits of her body “puts Ruth in touch with a need for others that runs through the undoing of the body and its interiority” (Mattessich 72). By surpassing the physical boundaries of her skull and bones, Ruth feels connected with the dead, who are also liberated from those confines. As she lets her brain take over her senses, Ruth is able to rely less on her perceptions of the world around her and more on the memories inside her head.

In the darkness, Ruth can slip away from the body that constrains her and focus on what she actually thinks instead of what she society tells her to think. She explains, “Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings” (116). By limiting her sight and extending her mind outside her own body, Ruth believes she can escape the material world that does not bring her any closer to the world of the dead. As she remembers her family, she asks, “...Why must we be left, the survivors picking among the flotsam, among the...clutter that was all that remained when they vanished...?” (116). Reminded of the debris floating around her flooded house, Ruth wonders why she is left with the worthless possessions of the dead when all she wants is to know them. In “Border Crossings”, Burke nicely summarizes Ruth’s feelings towards the tangible. “Appearance, because it constantly shifts, is too unstable in its forms to embody or reflect the real” (720). In the dark, Ruth is able to forget appearances and the clutter around her. For Juan, the nighttime also offered an escape and many of the spirits spoke to him in the dark when society’s construct of reality could not impede his senses. Just as Juan knows he has to listen to these haunting voices to learn about his father and Comala, Ruth understands she must find a way to push aside the tangible world in order to uncover her own history that death has repressed.

Ruth finds her answer in Sylvie. Ruth believes the life of a drifter will let her explore and preserve her memories while eliminating both clutter of society and its cut-and-dried version of reality. Burke explains that transience allows one to cross “from the experience of a world of loss and fragmentation to the perception of a world that is whole and complete” (717). Like Juan, Ruth feels that the reality in front of her is somehow incomplete and yearns for a way to “knit” it up (41). For both protagonists, it is a gradual process towards accepting this radical change. While Juan struggled to accept the dead as guides, Ruth must learn to understand her own corporeality and differentiate herself from the dead in order to unearth the history that the dead keep.

Another slip into darkness cements both the connection between Ruth and Sylvie and Ruth’s decision to drift. After they come home from the woods, Ruth falls asleep in the kitchen as Lucille accosts Sylvie for not being concerned for their whereabouts. As Ruth falls asleep, she listens to the conversation going on around her and thinks, “So this is all death is...” (118). Ruth’s curiosity about the dead makes her conflate a slip into sleep with actually dying. She hopes that her movement towards oblivion will continue, but she falls out of her chair (119). When she wakes, Sylvie is next to her. As if she knows what Ruth is thinking or has experienced the same slip before, Sylvie comments, “Sleep is best when you’re *really* tired...You don’t just sleep. You die” (119). While Ruth has no reaction, this exchange furthers the connection between Ruth and Sylvie. They both understand that bodiless moments can feel like death. “Sylvie,” Ruth says later, “I know, felt the life of perished things” (124).

As Ruth moves towards an escape from society, the stability of Fingerbone pulls Lucille closer. The citizens of Fingerbone are determined, out of “piety and good breeding”, to make sure that the girls stay firmly within the boundaries of “ordinary society” (183).

Lucille feels deeply embarrassed by Fingerbone's disapproval of their atypical family dynamics and tries to distance herself from their behavior. She is especially influenced by the mother of Rosette Brown (the girl whom Lucille sees as the epitome of young womanhood) who derides Sylvie's odd transient behaviors (104). While she initially attempts to defend her aunt and sister, she eventually finds it easier to mitigate her shame by acting and dressing in ways that reflect the expectations of others.

Not long after Ruth's slips into the darkness, Lucille gives up on her sister and fully commits to a life within society. Fed up with Sylvie's transient habits and Ruth's awkwardness towards her own body, Lucille leaves the family to go and live with her Home Economics teacher. Kaivola argues, "By opting for conventionality and severing her ties to Ruth and Sylvie, Lucille undoubtedly...pays a high price" (8). After losing her mother and grandmother, Lucille chooses to pursue a life inside society but must give up her only remaining familiar ties to do so. After her sister's sudden disappearance, Ruth laments, "I had no sister after that night" (140). Although she tries to maintain her life between her memories and the material world, Lucille's departure pushes Ruth further towards the life of transiency with Sylvie as her guide.

For Ruth, Lucille's world is somewhere she will never belong. "...It seemed to me," Ruth thinks, "that nothing I had lost, or might lose, could be found there..." (123). Whereas Lucille previously tried to persuade her to join her in the social order, Ruth now sees that society has nothing of value to her. Burke writes that Ruth chooses to "cross beyond" the conventional life that Lucille's society offers "in order to discover new territories available in Sylvie's explorations of spiritual and perceptual frontiers" (718). Ruth chooses transiency as a way to empower her own vision of reality.

As Ruth gives herself over to Sylvie's way of conceptualizing the world, she is reborn into a life of transiency. When she and Sylvie take stolen a rowboat to the mountains on the other side of the lake, images of birth suggest that Sylvie gives Ruth a new life through drifting. As they look for the rowboat on the shore, Ruth says of Sylvie, "I crouched and slept in her very shape like an unborn child" (145). Ruth transitions to her new life by reforming her body according to Sylvie's transitory life. For Ruth, this new life means a separation from society, a kind of death as she moves towards uncovering her own history. On their way across the lake, Ruth crawls out between Sylvie's legs, like a child being born (146). Although she begins the process of rebirth on the way across the lake, it is not until they return to Fingerbone that the process is complete. Just as Juan's death brings him nearer his mother and all the lost spirits of Comala, Ruth's rebirth also pushes her away from living society and closer to her mother and the other spirits trapped by the waters of Lake Fingerbone.

On the other side of the lake, Ruth discovers the way in which Sylvie can envision life even in ruin and death. Sylvie shows her a house that has crumbled into its own cellar and tells Ruth to look out for the children she still believes live in the woods. "I knew why Sylvie felt there were children in the woods. I felt so, too, though I did not think so" (154). Although Ruth and Sylvie both know the children are not there, Ruth realizes that Sylvie's desire to see them makes them real. "...When do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it?" (152). While Sylvie yearns to see the ghost children of the hills, Ruth desires very much to see her mother and realizes that this extreme longing can make this connection possible. She explains that "...whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again" (153). Ruth sees that Sylvie does not let the reality limit what she experiences. By following

Sylvie's example, Ruth understands that she can turn her desire to see her mother into her reality.

After this realization and her repeated slips into the darkness, Ruth begins to trust her senses over what she sees in front of her. In the rubble of the deteriorated house, Ruth is overwhelmed by the feeling of a family that lived there and, in a frenzy, digs through the clutter to find them. She knows there is nothing tangible but "to cease to hope would be the final betrayal" (158). Ruth is haunted by the ephemeral nature of the material things the dead left behind, but even though she knows she will never find the children, to forget them would be even worse than dying in the first place. Ruth wants to honor her family by not letting go of the only thing she has left of them: her memories.

For Ruth, the key to preserving these memories is to give up the illusory comforts of physical shelter along with the constraints that come with these comforts. While she has already decided that transiency is the way to do this, it is in these woods that she makes her final decision. "It is better to have nothing," Ruth thinks after she gives up the search for the children (159). "It is better to have nothing, for at last even our bones will fall" (159). While Juan finally accepts his own death as the next step towards uncovering his history, Ruth must rely on the freedom of drifting to be closer to her mother.

Though they take different paths to uncover their own stories, these characters share the imagery of death and rebirth. While Juan suffocates and appearing to be buried alive in the air, Freud would say that this action is just a desire to return to the womb. For Ruth, the imagery of birth is a little clearer. From an "unborn child" on the shore to a quick crawl "under [Sylvie's] body and out between her legs", Ruth is born yet again as they cross over the lake back to Fingerbone (145, 146). Ruth's final birth places her not only solidly in the world of transiency, but also gives her a new agency in her own life. Whereas she relied

heavily on Lucille or Sylvie for guidance, after her final symbolic crawl between Sylvie's legs on the bottom of the rowboat, Ruth tells Sylvie, "Let me try rowing" (170). While Juan's death and return to his mother place him in a position of power as a voice for the dead, Ruth, now outside of society and trusting her senses, can act a vessel to preserve the memories of her family.

Just before her final escape, Ruth reconsiders stories from the Bible, the defining story of Western society, through her new lens. She thinks of when Cain murdered Abel and "the blood cried out from the ground" (192). Ruth believes that God was jealous that Cain had given a voice to the earth, so He banished him. "...Cain became his children and their children and theirs, through a thousand generation, and all of them transients..." (193). She and Sylvie are descendents of these transients and remember the sadness of the earth. While God ordered a flood to wipe out the wicked, Ruth believes that the people who are left must still "taste a bit of blood and hair" in the waters that are left (193). Throughout her whole story, she drew allusions to the alternate world of Fingerbone Lake, but through this Biblical back-story, she explains why the lake haunts her:

I cannot taste a cup of water but I recall that the eye of the lake is my grandfather's, and that the lake's heavy, blind, encumbering waters composed my mother's limbs and weighed her garments and stopped her breath and stopped her sight. (193-194)

Ruth has lived around this lake her entire life, and every time she drinks a glass of water she remembers how, in death, her mother and grandfather have become a part of the lake. While most people might see this as horrific, Ruth views drinking this water as a communion, and hopes by remembering her family in this way she will one day be able to reunite with them (194). As Juan overcomes his fear of death and returns to the earth in

order to learn about his past, Ruth accepts nature and the dead into her body as a way of remembering her family.

“Memory is the sense of loss, and loss pulls us after it” (194). Ruth understands that her memories are what move her forward in life and have shaped her as a person. She wonders what would have happened if her mother had returned, instead of going sailing off the cliff, but knows “if she had simply brought us home again...I would not remember her that way” (197). Because her mother died, Ruth is forced to remember her in a certain way, but also uncovers a side of her mother’s personality she would not have otherwise understood. “We would have known nothing of the nature and reach of her sorrow if she had come back” (198). By remaining faithful to her memories, Ruth is able to know her mother better in death than she might have if she had lived.

“...Many household things are of purely sentimental value,” Ruth explains. “In the equal light of disinterested scrutiny such things are not themselves. They are transformed into pure object, and are horrible, and must be burned” (209). Determined to keep their small family together, Ruth and Sylvie decide to break free of Fingerbone once and for all by burning down their house. “Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping” (209). They believe that the house, like the body, is a deceptive comfort that only binds them to a society that would prefer to repress their history and keep them confined. Just as Juan’s death allows him total freedom to learn from the dead, destroying their house gives Ruth and Sylvie the power to escape from society by leaving no material trace as they themselves become a haunting presence just beyond the borders of a life defined by the tangible.

This final slip into the world of transiency allows Ruth and Sylvie not only to chip away the boundary between the dead and the living for themselves but also for Lucille. Even

though she is still a member of conventional society, Lucille begins to see her aunt and sister in the same places that Ruth saw their mother: her dreams, a gust of wind, the smell of lake water, and imagined returns. Ruth pictures her sister imitating the transient habits she once deplored and thinks that no one watching Lucille “could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence...” (219). By leaving society, Ruth and Sylvie are able to impart their faith in memory and curiosity about the dead to Lucille.

6. CONCLUSION

For Juan and Ruth, “giving up the ghost” does not simply mean dying. For them, the phrase signals an indifference or negligence towards the ghost—literally an abandonment of the spirit. Both characters are aware of the historical negligence that occurs when people assume that because a body dies, the spirit is no longer in contact with the physical world. In “Death Shall Have No Dominion”, Jackson writes that denying the dead a place in the world of the living is “a rejection of both our past and future” (54). By repressing death, society suppresses both personal and communal memories about the dead and the history they embody.

Examining *Pedro Páramo* and *Housekeeping* for instances of the uncanny shows how accepting death can help us uncover what society has repressed. Juan is hesitant at first to listen to the spirits who speak to him about Comala’s past. He quickly learns though that they are the only ones that know the Comala of his imagination- the image created from his mother’s nostalgic stories. Only by accepting his place among the dead can he fulfill his mother’s wish and find his father. By recognizing the dead, Juan breaks away from his perception of what is real and reveals his previously repressed history.

Ruth, who already accepts the presence of the dead in her life, breaks free of a society that only wants to repress her memories and take away her history. Sylvie guides Ruth to a life of transiency where Ruth is able to take control of her senses and preserve her dead family in memory. In their escape from society, Ruth and Sylvie are able to pass on their beliefs about the importance of memory to Lucille.

Nicholas Royle writes, “To affirm the uncanny ‘presence’ and power of ghosts is not to give oneself up to some gothic fantasy or lugubrious nostalgia: it is the very basis of trying

to think about the future” (54). Challenging societal conceptions of reality allows both Juan and Ruth to provide hope for the futures of their communities by bringing to light a previously buried past. By slipping into the dark, Juan and Ruth break down the barrier between the living and the dead to create a future in which personal and communal memory, not society, dictates reality.

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