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Generosity of Spirit: Faith, Democracy, and Grace in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

“Wherever you turn your eyes the world can shine like transfiguration. You don't have to bring a thing to it except a little willingness to see. Only, who could have the courage to see it?” --Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*

So writes John Ames, a primary character in contemporary American author Marilynne Robinson's books about Gilead, Iowa, a fictional small town on the edge of the prairie. Ames, a preacher, is attuned to the radiance of the world--the way that light and holiness appear in ordinary moments and in ordinary people. He is equally aware of the way that people consistently and inevitably fail each other and themselves--the inherent loneliness, brokenness, and fallibility of the human race. Through his character, and the other characters in her books, Robinson's stories ask--and answer--the questions, “What do we deserve, and what do we owe each other in this life?”

Put simply, her solution is grace: through her Gilead books, Robinson presents a picture of a gracious--or graceful-- American experience. Robinson is an avowed Calvinist, and Calvinism is usually perceived as a harsh strain of Christianity. However, Robinson's particular brand of Calvinism is gentler, emphasizing grace, immanence, and the sacredness of the individual. Robinson acknowledges that America is young and flawed, and yet, she believes, it is--or was-- characterized by a spirit of independence and generosity. Robinson believes that this important byproduct of America's Calvinist roots is fading and being replaced by a

Christianity--and a larger culture-- characterized by fear and distrust. But she holds out hope anyway, using the 1950s small town of Gilead, Iowa, and its inhabitants to make her point about the grace that every individual has the power to extend to others. This is exemplified in her Gilead books through characters like John Ames, Jack Boughton, and especially Lila Ames. Those last two, Jack and Lila, are outsiders--to Gilead and also to formal religion. Yet often, they are better at understanding and applying love and grace than the more traditionally religious characters, like Ames. Robinson uses them to demonstrate the value and diversity of human discourse, from our inner monologue to the conversations we have with others. And, most importantly, perhaps, Robinson displays through her characters' perspective the wondrous miracle of life as we can experience it--acknowledging the injustice and loneliness inherent to the human experience here on earth, and suggesting that the only hope we have of reducing that suffering is relationship. Robinson argues for generous discourse, which allows us to connect even with those who have failed us, because, she believes, we all deserve the grace that we are able to extend to each other. The American experience, then, is to Robinson a tangible, understandable example of the freedom available to all of us: the ability to connect with each other graciously, generously, and compassionately, despite our failures and differences. In fact, Robinson argues through her books that the only way we can alleviate the injustice, loneliness, and suffering that are inevitable in this life is to treat other people as though they are infinitely precious and worthy of forgiveness, which takes courage and intentionality.

### Robinson's Gilead Books

Marilynne Robinson is an American novelist and essayist. Her three most recent works of fiction center on a small town in Iowa in the mid-1950s. The first, *Gilead*, is a series of letters by

Congregationalist minister John Ames to his young son. Ames's father and grandfather shared the same name and profession. In *Gilead*, Ames is an old man. Late in his life, he has married Lila, a younger woman with whom he has the son, Robby. Ames, knowing he will not live long enough to see his son grow up, wants to impart his wisdom to Robby, which is why he chooses to write the letters. Most of this wisdom is highly theological in nature, including reflections on books he has read, sermons he has delivered, and religious experiences he has had. He also tells some personal stories; the most important one unfolds as he is writing the letters. It is the story of Jack Boughton's return to Gilead. Jack, who is named after John Ames, is the son of Robert Boughton, the town's Presbyterian minister and Ames's best friend. Jack, now in his forties, left Gilead decades before while in college, abandoning a young girl he had become involved with and the child he had with her. The rest of the Boughton family was left to deal with the consequences of his actions--caring for the young girl and the baby, who were extremely poor and lived in squalor at the edge of town. Eventually, however, the baby died, and the young girl moved away, never to be seen again. Jack never expresses any interest in either of them again, and in fact never returns to the scene of his series of tragic mistakes until he reappears in *Gilead*.

*Home*, the second novel, tells the same story of Jack's return, but through the perspective of his sister Glory, who has also returned to Gilead just months before to care for their aging father. Jack comes back seeking reconciliation, and the two families must put to use the forgiveness and grace that their Christian faith, which they have claimed all their lives, requires of them.

*Lila*, the third book, is set a few years earlier than the other two and tells the story of Lila's life from her earliest memory to the birth of Robby. Lila, an outsider all her life, grew up

with a group of migrant workers who were not related to her by blood. Her early adulthood was a patchwork of experiences on the margins of society. She arrives in Gilead by chance, intending to pass through, but strikes up an unlikely relationship with John Ames, and they marry shortly afterward. Even though their experiences up until that point have been vastly different, Lila and Ames are able to communicate on the basis of a mutual understanding of the value of the human soul.

### American Activism in Gilead

As an illustration of her ideas about the inherent value of humanity, Robinson is intentional about setting her stories in a place that is historically associated with American activism. 1950s Gilead, Iowa, where the books are set, is loosely based on a real town in Iowa. The characters refer to Iowa on a couple of occasions as the “shining star of radicalism,” a reference to a Ulysses E. Grant quote. This is because Iowa was a stopping place for radicals like John Brown during the Civil War era, and many of the small communities like the one Robinson creates in the books supported him and his cause. As both John Ames and Jack mention at different times in *Gilead* and *Home*, Iowa was one of the only states not to have anti-miscegenation laws during the mid-twentieth century when the novels take place. John Ames’s grandfather, the first John Ames, is also a preacher and a close friend and associate of John Brown. “Radical” is a good way to describe him; he claims to experience visions and fights for social and racial justice (sometimes literally). In a letter, which John Ames includes inside his own letters to his son, the grandfather writes, “When I was a young man the Lord came to me and put his hand just here on my right shoulder. I can feel it still. And He spoke to me, very clearly. The words went right through me. He said, Free the captive. Preach good news to the

poor. Proclaim liberty throughout the land” (*Gilead* 175). These convictions manifest as his radical fight for racial justice during the Civil War period. However, this radicalism is denounced by Ames’s pacifist father, John Ames II, who was alienated by John Ames I’s actions (which are sometimes violent). But our John Ames seems to understand his grandfather’s convictions, at least, if not his methods of achieving them. He realizes that it is essential to acknowledge suffering and injustice in order to give or receive grace. Ames and his grandfather share the same sense of the failings of their nation (and, by extension, its people). They recognize the insufficiency of humanity to consistently do right by each other. Ames’s grandfather says, “The President, General Grant, once called Iowa the shining star of radicalism. But what is left here in Iowa? What is left here in Gilead? Dust. Dust and ashes. Scripture says the people perish, and they certainly do. It is remarkable. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His Hand is stretched out still” (*Gilead* 176). Here he presents a view of the issue that is remarkably similar to Ames’s conception of grace. He acknowledges God’s judgment against the injustices of humanity, while simultaneously granting that God has not given up on Iowa or the “dust” that inhabits it-- “His Hand is stretched out still.” It is a rather hopeful take for an otherwise severe character.

Ames’s responses to the issues of racial injustice are less principled than those of his grandfather. He hesitates and hedges, never quite sure how to address the issue when it faces him head-on. After Jack reveals his interracial marriage to Ames and asks him whether he thinks that he and his wife could live safely in Gilead, Ames consciously deflects the question, as he does so many of Jack’s questions:

“But then he said, ‘What about this town? If we came here and got married, could we live here?’

Well, I didn’t know the answer to that one, either. I thought so.

He said, ‘There was a fire at the Negro church.’  
 ‘That was a little nuisance fire, and it happened many years ago.’” (*Gilead* 231).

Ames does not like to lack the answers to any question posed by Jack Boughton. But here, he recognizes that his lack of answers represents his own complacency. He does not know if Jack’s wife would be welcome in Gilead because he has not had to face this issue before-- or at least not recently. Neither has anyone else in the small town. Ames cannot promise the social generosity--or justice-- that Jack desires on behalf of the other townspeople, because he is aware that despite what the laws say or do not say, they are enforced socially and that requires everyone to agree, or at least to be tolerant. Although he is not much of an activist, at least John Ames is honest. He recognizes the failings of America as a whole, and understands that they are probably present in the individuals living in Gilead, even the members of his own congregation.

Christopher Douglas, in an article on multiculturalism and race in *Gilead*, follows the idea of social justice in Robinson’s novels. The article is critical of Robinson’s representation of racial issues in *Gilead* and *Home*. Douglas argues that Robinson tries to place her “liberal Christianity” in opposition to the conservative, evangelical Christianity of the last 40-50 years: “Robinson's Christianity is short on doctrine and long on wonder, mystery, and wisdom” (339). He argues that she does this through the racial and civil rights themes that emerge in the books. In so doing, Douglas states, she is ignoring the historical reality of Christian support of slavery and Jim Crow. According to Douglas, Robinson is attempting to locate Christianity--at least liberal Christianity--as a form of cultural identity, an oft-forgotten “answer” to America’s ills. Essentially, Douglas thinks that Robinson is leaving out the parts of American Christian history that do not conveniently fit into her perception of Christianity. He finds this problematic, because it is coupled with Robinson’s ideas about writing as truth and as the result of historical

experience: “In *Gilead* the narrator, John Ames, suggests that in writing his sermons he is ‘Trying to say what was true’ (19), and in this spot at least I think we could say that the narrator and author both conceive of writing - sermons or novels - as forms of truth telling, or at least trying to get at the true, even given the mystery of existence” (Douglas 338). Douglas’s conclusion is that Robinson is simplifying--perhaps out of ignorance, or simply out of will--the ugly side of American Christianity: “Her historiography, as Deresiewicz suggests and as I have tried to show in detail, is as partial and narrow as that to which it is opposed” (350).

However, Douglas’s conclusion is not satisfying, because Robinson’s work leaves room for a fundamentally different understanding of the role of race relations in the books. While Douglas describes *Gilead* as an “intertext” to Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, essentially arguing that the book is *about* race relations and their place in contemporary Christianity, another (perhaps more common) understanding of the book is that race relations are an *example* used by Robinson of the unhealed wounds left in America’s social consciousness. Robinson presents the idea that it is only the boundless grace that Ames and the other characters constantly talk about and experience that can heal these wounds. Race relations is the issue that has plagued Americans from the founding of the country, and I believe Robinson has chosen it as a display to accompany her larger argument-- that grace, as understood by John Ames, Lila, and Jack, is the source--or maybe the replacement of--true justice.

### Robinson and Calvinism

In order to understand the grace that Ames, Lila, Jack, and the other characters grapple with in the books, it is necessary to understand how Robinson draws on and addresses John Calvin’s theology. Robinson, a Calvinist, presents her view on American Christianity,

Calvinism, and the role of theology in American culture. She does this through the voices of her characters, especially the two preachers and best friends John Ames and Robert Boughton. In an article on Robinson's theology, David Anderson writes: "Certainly her twinned novels, *Gilead* and *Home*, which center on the families of a Congregationalist and Presbyterian minister, respectively, show her perfectly at home in the inch-apart strains of Reformed and Calvinist theology. Indeed, the seriousness with which theology in general and Calvinist theology in particular is woven through the two novels makes Robinson unique among modern writers" (Anderson). Robinson's focus on Calvinist theology is intentional and essential to her readers' understanding of the books.

Calvinism is a Protestant theology that dates back to the 16th century. The writings of theologian John Calvin promote the ideas of total depravity, unconditional election (predestination), and prevenient grace. Calvinism manifested itself as Puritanism in America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In chapter two of *John Calvin's American Legacy*, David Little writes about the similarities between the structure of Puritanism and American democracy. For example, Puritans believed in liberty, a fundamental written code (prefiguring the Constitution), the importance of education, and a limited government controlled by the people.

In many ways, Robinson's take on this theology complicates the traditional American--and even global-- conception of Calvinism. Traditionally, Calvinism is regarded as a harsh denomination, due to John Calvin's emphasis on predestination and human depravity, as well as the denomination's relationship to Puritanism. But Robinson's work casts a more favorable light on Calvin's ideas: "In both her fiction and nonfiction Robinson seeks—and to a large extent succeeds, for the attentive reader—in dismantling the negative stereotypes of John



Calvin, Calvinism, and Calvinism's Puritan progeny and reasserting the value of his theology in a contemporary context" (Anderson). Robinson believes that Calvinism is a foundational theology to American Christianity. She also believes that it is being slowly abandoned by Americans, in favor of less rigid beliefs, which might not deal with the less palatable tenets of Christianity, such as original sin: "I don't know whether it is time or history or Calvin that has left me so profoundly convinced of human fallibility, and so struck by its peculiar character. But I wouldn't mind hearing the word 'sin' once in awhile" ("Awakening" 101). Robinson believes it is necessary to acknowledge sin in order to address the injustice and suffering that we inflict on other people. This acknowledgement of the role that humans play in perpetuating injustice is essential to Robinson's larger point that she makes in her books and her essays, that the only way we can overcome that injustice is changing our own behavior--being more graceful and more generous. So here, Robinson draws out the parts of Calvinism that she believes are essential to the American experience, and, on a grander scale, to the human experience.

Robinson's brand of Calvinism, as well as that of her character John Ames, focuses heavily on grace. Thomas J. Davis, editor of *John Calvin's American Legacy*, writes on "John Calvin at 'Home' in American Culture" -- a reference to *Home*. He says of the book, "And the language of grace permeates the book—grace not as an easy pick-me-up for what ails you, but as the mysterious and awe-inspiring grace that recognizes life and its meaning as gifts of the divine, shared with humans, which humans try and yet sometimes fail to embrace" (270). Davis's conclusion is that Robinson's work, which focuses on the divine importance of the individual, as well as Calvinist elements like predestination and grace, makes the case that Calvinism should be one of the ideas "at the family table of American traditions." He argues this in the context of a

book that has focused on the history of Calvinism in various American religious events (specifically Puritanism and the Great Awakenings).

As Davis points out, this relevance to American history is another essential element of Robinson's Calvinism. Robinson draws attention to the historical significance of Calvin's ideas about divine intention by connecting them to the American experience in an essay, in which she quotes Abraham Lincoln:

“Lincoln spoke in Calvinist language to a population it might have been meaningful at the time to call Calvinist, as the historians generally do. He says, Accept suffering with humility. Both suffering and humility will serve you. This apparent fatalism is actually confidence that life is shaped by divine intention, which will express itself in ways that can be baffling or alarming but that always bring an insight, pose a question, or make a demand, to the benefit of those that are alert to the will of God. The activism, even radicalism, of this tradition is inscribed very deeply on modern and American history. At the same time it was characterized by a striking inwardness, based on an immediate, an unmediated conversation between the Lord and the individual soul.” (“Awakening” 100)

The presence of Calvinist ideas in Lincoln's speech is evidence to Robinson that Calvinist ideas are foundational to Americanness, whether we acknowledge it or not. She attributes Lincoln's confidence that “both suffering and humility will serve you” to Calvinism, and, by extension, to the American spirit. Robinson believes that the strain of Americanness that she calls “activism, even radicalism” is a direct result of the impact of Calvinist ideas like divine intention.

Essentially, Robinson is saying that once we acknowledge this divine intention, we are required to participate in it: to ask questions and to attempt to change what's wrong with the world as we see it in order to carry out the grand plan of God.

Through her books, Robinson asserts that Calvinism is still an essential part of American culture, even despite its reputation: “In some sense, the recent novels might even be considered something of a reclamation project, an effort to reassert serious theology as part of cultural

discourse” (Anderson). Robinson believes that theology and religious tradition have had special power in American culture, certainly in areas like social activism and justice. Robinson writes in a recent essay that she is concerned about the impact of modern Christianity on that history: “The simple, central, urgent, pressure to step over the line that separates the saved from the unsaved, and after this the right, even the obligation, to turn and judge that great sinful world the redeemed have left behind--this is what I see as the essential nature of the emerging Christianity. Those who have crossed this line can be outrageously forgiving of one another and themselves, and very cruel in their denunciations of anyone else. Somehow in their minds this does not make them hypocrites, a word that for Jesus clearly had a particular sting. And no, this is not Calvinism” (“Awakening” 102). To Robinson, what is missing in the modern conception of American Christianity she describes is Calvin’s emphasis on the idea of human depravity--grace is not as powerful or necessary if we do not acknowledge the ways that humanity constantly fails itself--through hypocrisy, through support of unjust systems, and, most fundamentally, through a refusal to value other people. An understanding of this is essential to the spirit of American activism that emerges in Robinson’s books.

Another way that Robinson challenges traditional ideas of Calvinism is by drawing on the American spiritual tradition of Transcendentalism to present a unique, but appealing, version of Calvinism that emphasizes the inherent “loveliness” of mankind. Her characters interact with Transcendentalism, sometimes directly (John Ames references founding Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson on more than one occasion), and sometimes indirectly, through transcendent experiences involving light and the natural world. Robinson unites Transcendentalism’s focus on self-reliance and the divinity of the individual with John Calvin’s humanist tendencies. Both

Calvin and Robinson believe in the innate capacity for wonder and grace in humans. Robinson reasons that this is as natural to us as the depravity that she also acknowledges. She writes in an essay, "The divine image in us, despite all, is an act of God, immune to our sacrilege, apparent in the loveliness that never ceases to shine out in incalculable instances of beauty and love and imagination that make the dire assessment of our character, however solidly grounded in our history and our prospects, radically untrue" ("Son of Adam, Son of Man" 256). Robinson believes that because humans are made in God's image, there is a streak of the divine in us. This is an echo of Transcendentalist thought, and it places Robinson's Calvinism securely in American religious tradition.

Robinson uses the concept of immanence, the presence of God in the physical environment, to demonstrate the value of the individual. "My sermon was on light, or Light," John Ames writes of the morning when he and Lila first see each other (*Gilead* 162). She wanders into the church to escape the rain and listens to Ames's sermon on Pentecost. The moment, as described by both of them in *Gilead* and *Lila*, is one of immanence. Each of Robinson's characters experience immanence, recognizing the presence of the holy in the ordinary events of their lives. John Ames reflects on this at the end of *Gilead*: "It has seemed to me sometimes as though the Lord breathes on this poor gray ember of Creation and it turns to radiance--for a moment or a year or the span of a life. And then it sinks back into itself again, and to look at it no one would know it had anything to do with fire, or light" (*Gilead* 245). Ames takes special notice of the way the light shines--over the prairie, on his son's hair, through the windows of his church. Each of these moments seems holy to him. It is their ordinariness and their impermanence that makes them so beautiful.

Robinson uses light as an image to represent the grace that she contends is necessary to understand human dignity. In his article, Browne also discusses the role of the image of light in *Gilead*, suggesting that it is a metaphor for grace. He translates Ames's many musings about light into a single idea, that light is intended to be a visible, if not tangible, representation of God's grace and the experience associated with it:

“The grammar of light permeates *Gilead*. The parallel structure of the passage, its elevated diction, "incandescence," and the image of lighted candles together induce a weighty religious feeling, which, like democracy, is rooted in the everyday individual human being--in "the dignity of human nature," as Dewey claims above.” (Browne)

Browne makes connections between Robinson, John Dewey, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards, suggesting that all four have similar things to say about the need to participate in this world--to recognize everyday miracles and the inherent beauty of nature and of other people--in order to make the connection between what we can see and the larger grace, or light, that envelops all of us. Ames demonstrates the need to actively participate in grace through his constant reflections on the nature and beauty of light: “For Ames, the realization of grace evoked by images of light consistently transitions from the abstract to the concrete, everyday object...Grace is a relation between the human and the deity, but perception of that grace is made possible by the immanence of God's beauty in the physical environment and in other human beings--in other words, by prevenient grace” (Browne). Light is the symbol for all that we cannot understand. This is an incredibly important piece of Robinson's work--the idea that grace is right here, right now, found in the light (or grace) of relationship. We can, and do, experience divinity in nature, in beauty, and in other people, and we can acknowledge it through grace--extending undeserved love.

## A Generous Spirit: The Practical Application of Grace

Robinson's characters have a spirit of generosity that functions as the practical application of grace. John Ames, early in *Gilead* and *Home*, has to apply what he has learned about grace all his life when Jack Boughton, his namesake, returns to Gilead. At first, Ames cannot imagine forgiving Jack for abandoning the young girl he becomes "associated" with and their child: "I don't forgive him. I wouldn't know where to begin" (*Gilead* 164). But as he reflects on Jack, he begins to realize that, in more ways than just their names, he and Jack are similar: "John Ames Boughton is my son. If there is any truth at all in anything I believe, that is true also. By 'my son,' I mean another self, a more cherished self" (*Gilead* 189). Ames identifies with Jack for the first time, recognizing that the human idea of justice almost never gets carried out: "History could make a stone weep....If young Boughton is my son, then by the same reasoning that child of his was also my daughter, and it was just terrible what happened to her, and that's a fact" (*Gilead* 190). Ames has to come to terms with the fact that forgiving Jack is simultaneously the simplest and the most difficult challenge he faces in life. Ames ponders this for the rest of the novel: "It seems to me that people tend to forget that we are to love our enemies, not to satisfy some standard of righteousness, but because God their Father loves them" (*Gilead* 189). He realizes that he does not get to choose which people deserve his love and grace. This grace is generosity--the giving of an undeserved gift.

Prevenient grace, the idea that God initiates forgiveness even before humans know they need it, appears throughout Robinson's theology: "Robinson largely refuses to allow the novel to pass judgment, just as in Calvinist theology judgment is reserved for God" (Browne). Browne argues that Robinson's use of prevenient grace establishes it as something that overshadows the

need for human-driven justice, since humans have neither the power nor the need to judge others if those others have already been forgiven by God: “Throughout the novel, John Ames struggles to grant precedence to grace over judgment and justice, poetic or otherwise” (Browne). Ames’s final acceptance of this grace is when he forgives Jack at the end of *Gilead*, a single moment for which he claims all his years as a preacher and in seminary prepared him.

Browne also reflects on the form of *Gilead*, asserting that it is itself a representation of prevenient grace.

“At this point it is important to reiterate that the novel is a series of letters, so the scenes reveal not necessarily what happened, but how Ames remembers and reinterprets what occurred as he writes them down to explain his life to his son. So the reworking of these scenes, even though they appear relatively chronologically in the narrative, is concurrent with Ames's struggle to make sense of his life and his struggle with Jack Boughton through writing. (3) Not only light, but also the act of writing signals prevenient grace” (Browne).

John Ames’s ability to contextualize his struggles with grace by looking backwards at his life is an act of restoration. Ames is restoring his past self--what actually happened--to his present understanding of himself and his actions. This restoration is grace, too--grace for himself, grace for his son, and grace to the reader.

In *Lila*, the title character reflects on the problems we face when we try to judge who deserves punishment and who deserves mercy: “If any scoundrel could be pulled into heaven just to make his mother happy, it couldn’t be fair to punish scoundrels who happened to be orphans, or whose mothers didn’t even like them, and who would probably have better excuses for the harm they did than the ones who had somebody caring about them” (*Lila* 259). Browne points out an incredibly important piece of Robinson’s work--the idea that grace is right here, right now, found in the light of relationship: “Grace inheres in the physical and spiritual relation

between people, and, finally, it has nothing at all to do with justice, but with the dignity inherent in human coexistence. It has everything to do with forgiveness” (Browne).

Browne’s essay does not directly deal with *Lila*, which was published just a year before he wrote the essay. However, *Lila* is an excellent complement to many of the ideas that he puts forth, and it also complicates them in some ways. Lila is a character with no background in theology, unlike the other main characters in the books. She has the most complicated backstory of any of the residents of Gilead. *Lila* tells the story of Lila’s life from her earliest memory to the birth of Robby, her son. Despite not knowing precise details about herself, such as her exact age or last name, Lila is beautifully self-aware and extremely intelligent. Lila’s various experiences on the margins of society--living as a migrant worker, in a brothel, and as a cleaning woman, to name a few-- give her an extremely different outlook on life from that of her husband John Ames. Yet by the end of the story, she seems to have an equally mature understanding of the mystery of grace and light. She, without being as conscious of it as Ames, also connects light to the grace of God. Her first experience in a church occurs on a gloomy day, when she is drawn in by the warmth and light of candles: “But the rain was bad and that day was a Sunday, so there was no other doorway for her to step into. The candles surprised her. It might all have seemed so beautiful because she’d been missing a few meals. That can make things brighter somehow. Brighter and farther away” (*Lila* 11). From the very beginning, then, Lila is just as aware of immanence--the radiance of everyday moments--as Ames is. Lila is a textbook example of a recipient of prevenient grace; she never has a single conversion moment, but instead a series of revelations that lead to an untraditional, but altogether graceful, conclusion at the end of the book: “Pity us, yes, but we are brave, she thought, and wild, more life in us than we can bear, the



fire infolding itself in us” (*Lila* 261). She understands, possibly more quickly and easily than Ames, that she has received this grace not because of any action she’s taken, or set of doctrine that she believes, but simply as a result of existence. It is a byproduct of her innate dignity.

Lila is also a distinctly American character; her fierce independence and self-reliance feel like intentional allusions to the common perception of Americans as self-made, self-sustaining people. Yet Lila is fragile, too, as a result of her isolation. She is lonely, as anyone would be in her situation, and she longs for human connection: “It was that feeling that she had had walking along beside him that put the notion in her mind. It comes from being alone too much. Things matter that wouldn’t if you had a regular life” (*Lila* 81). Robinson’s addition of Lila’s voice to the Gilead story is essential to a complete understanding of the message she is trying to send through her fiction: that participation in grace is essential to true relationship.

Ames frequently describes the grace of God as a “deep mystery,” and Lila comes to the same conclusion by the end of *Lila*. She recognizes--or maybe she has known all along--that things happen to people in this life that cannot be reconciled with the human conception of justice. All we can do, she realizes, is know that everyone has some shred of dignity and sacredness, even far below the surface. Lila thinks, “There was no way to abandon guilt, no decent way to disown it. All the tangles and knots of bitterness and desperation and fear had to be pitied. No, better, grace had to fall over them” (*Lila* 259). She knows she has no hope of understanding eternity or grace or who gets to experience them, so she settles to know that this life is both painful and utterly beautiful, and that is enough for her.

Lila’s and Ames’s unlikely marriage is a result of their willingness to build relationship across difference. Even though Lila and John Ames have almost nothing in common when they

meet, they are able to communicate through a mutual spirit of generosity. Both are willing to listen to the other with genuine intent to understand--or at least admit when they do not. Soon after they meet, John Ames writes Lila a letter, which ends with the lines, "I still have not answered your question, I know, but thank you for asking it. I may be learning something from the attempt" (*Lila* 77). Lila tries to decide how she will respond to Ames's letter. At first she feels shame and then remembers the acceptance Ames extends to her: "Then what was she supposed to do? Write him a letter? She'd shame herself. Those big, ugly words on a piece of tablet paper, nothing spelled right. But then she'd shamed herself before and he never seemed to mind. Planting her spuds in the flower garden. Knocking at his door before the sun was well up to ask him her one question" (*Lila* 77). The sociocultural divide between them is not erased, but Ames and Lila operate in spite of it, both of them graciously accepting the awkwardness of their early interactions and using their mutual loneliness to form an initial connection.

*Lila* can be read as a statement of the need for generous discourse in the modern era. Because Lila is an outsider who has almost nothing In an article, Erin Penner describes how much of Robinson's work has been identified with nineteenth century writing, like Emily Dickinson's, because it lacks the cynicism common in contemporary writing. Penner uses a contrast between Lila and Addie Bundren, a character from William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, to support her claim that Lila is a literary representation of the ideas Robinson puts forth in her essays and interviews about the need to communicate beyond and in spite of difference. Penner draws attention to the use of language in the book:

"Within *Lila*, her protagonist demands of Ames a theological language that does not become inaccessible or rigid in its attempts to defend beauty. Ames maintains his attachment to the theology of his predecessors, but Lila engages him through metaphor in a way that she could not if he employed theological terms. The flexibility of those

metaphors that caused Ames such consternation in Gilead is also the means by which he and Lila can communicate across a monumental socio-cultural divide” (Penner).

Language and communication are essential to any kind of discourse, and Penner points out that there are ways for very different people to use them to understand each other, just as Ames and Lila are able to communicate in *Lila*, even early in their relationship.. We are not so different that we cannot listen and learn from each other: “Although the previous novels in Robinson's world of Gilead, Iowa, feature conversation--whether in epistolary form, from father to son, or in glimpses of the decades-long friendship of two pastors--Lila brings to the foreground conversation across difference” (Penner). This conversation across difference--which Penner believes Robinson argues we have lost in American culture--leads to true relationship.

Lila, who is used to having no one to talk to but herself, is open to any kind of relationship that presents itself: “Doll's example emboldens Lila to lay claim to relationship wherever and however she can” (Penner). Lila is herself an example, then, of the way that Penner (and Robinson) believe that we need connection and mutual understanding not only to create and preserve our relationships with individuals, but also with the rest of our culture--our democracy: “Robinson attests to the value of American democracy in part by condemning whatever political, literary, or religious structures might be erected to create a feeling of safety, and to limit one's obligations to extend sympathy to another” (Penner).

Lila's understanding of the importance of relationship is connected to Robinson's ideas about Americanness. Penner highlights a quote in Robinson's interview with Barack Obama about the essence of American democracy: “Well, I believe that people are images of God. There's no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding. What can I say? It seems to me as if democracy is the logical, the inevitable

consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level. And it (applies) to everyone” (“A Conversation” 291). Robinson believes that, despite human fallibility, there is a little bit of that light within Light that John Ames talks about within each of us--the image of God. And that is what equalizes us--not what we do, but how we are created. Robinson is essentially arguing not that we need to naively assume the best of other people, but that we have to accept that they will fail us every time, just as we fail them. That attitude, or language, of acceptance and vulnerability is evident in *Lila* and in the rest of Robinson’s work.

Robinson addresses human difference in her novels, arguing that it is not something to be overcome, but something just as beautiful as any other part of this life. John Ames understands that every person has a different way of processing, interpreting, and existing in this world:

“In every important way we are such secrets from one another, and I do believe that there is a separate language in each of us, also a separate aesthetics and a separate jurisprudence. Every single one of us is a little civilization built on the ruins of any number of preceding civilizations, but with our own variant notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable - which, I hasten to add, we generally do not satisfy and by which we struggle to live. We take fortuitous resemblances among us to be actual likeness, because those around us have also fallen heir to the same customs, trade in the same coin, acknowledge, more or less, the same notions of decency and sanity. But all that really just allows us to coexist with the inviolable, intraversable, and utterly vast spaces between us” (*Gilead* 197).

Amy Hungerford writes about this idea in a chapter of *Postmodern Belief* on Marilynne Robinson’s books. She calls it “the forms we have available to us,” arguing that these forms, particularly religion and language, are not enough to explain everything, or to cross those “intraversable, utterly vast spaces between us.” However, she writes, they are enough to allow us to build relationships--and maybe that’s all we are supposed to do with them anyway.

Hungerford begins her discussion of Robinson with a quote from one of Robinson's essays that compares religious belief to the process of writing. Hungerford focuses the following lines by Robinson: "Any writer who has wearied of words knows the feeling of being limited by the very things that enable. To associate religion with unwavering faith in any creed or practice does no justice at all to its complexity as lived experience. Creeds themselves exist to stabilize the intense speculations that religion, which is always about the ultimate nature of things, will inspire" ("That Highest Candle"). Hungerford interprets this quote to mean that though no set of beliefs will fully explain everything, we can nonetheless use them to stabilize our wildly various, individual views of the world. To Hungerford, Robinson's books are about belief:

"The position Robinson stakes out here analogizes the word-ward a writer draws upon (sometimes wearily) with the creedal resources of the world's religions. Both the reality of the divine and the human meanings a writer seeks to articulate exceed these 'stabilizing' resources, these formal discursive structures through which human beings attempt to channel lived experience (of the divine, of the world). The limitations of these resources are not a reason, for Robinson, to abandon the effort to shape experience through creedal reflection or to throw out the idea of creeds--or to stop writing" (Hungerford 113).

Form is created collectively by people--it leads to mutual acceptance of rules, ideas, or conventions. Hungerford's understanding of Robinson's position is this: while it is individual experiences themselves--literary or religious-- that actually lead to an understanding of meaning, we need form (tradition, creed, convention) to translate that meaning into something we can incorporate into our interactions with others.

Hungerford's conclusion is that Robinson is presenting, through her fiction, a meditation on human difference: "It becomes clear that difference is not for Robinson a problem to be solved but rather the occasion for living a religious life" (Hungerford 121). Hungerford believes that Robinson's take on religious belief is that it is a way to reconcile differences on every level.

Each individual has a different experience, yet these experiences are grouped organically by the forms we choose. And since every person is equally unable to understand every part of reality, the only way that we have to close the gaps between us is to use the forms that we have created for ourselves.

This explains Robinson's preoccupation with theological discourse in her Gilead books. Theological discourse is one of the primary ways that Robinson's characters build relationships. Jack Boughton and John Ames have several conversations in *Gilead* and *Home* about Christian theology and Calvinism in particular, discussing ideas like sin, grace, salvation, and predestination. However, most of these early conversations are not productive, and some are actually damaging to the already-fragile relationship between the two of them. This is because although they are conversing, neither is actually trying to understand the other's position. Rather both are attempting to assert something about their judgment of the other person. Jack accuses Ames of being "cagey" when Ames will not give a straightforward answer to Jack's question about predestination (*Gilead* 151). Ames admits to himself afterward that he should have handled the situation better: "But it is hard for me to see good faith in John Ames Boughton, and that's a terrible problem. As we were walking home, your mother said, 'He was only asking a question,' which was almost a rebuke, coming from her. Then, after we'd walked a little farther, she said, 'Maybe some people aren't comfortable with themselves.' Now, that *was* a rebuke" (*Gilead* 154). Lila is the character with the least experience with theology or traditional religion, yet she comes in between Ames and Jack to help them build a true mutual understanding. During Ames's and Jack's precarious conversation about predestination, it is Lila's voice that offers Jack comfort: "A person can change. Everything can change" (*Gilead* 153). Lila's experiences allow

her to recognize that everything is temporal, fragile, and that grace-- or generosity-- is all we have to offer each other.

In comparison to Ames and Lila, Jack has trouble with the idea of grace. He is confused and often frustrated by the way that his father, Boughton, treats him with seemingly endless kindness and forgiveness, even though his actions do not warrant it. Even Glory, his sister, who is at least able to identify old Boughton's behavior as "grace," is nonetheless constantly surprised by the way that Jack is treated. At one point, Jack confronts old Boughton about it and his father says, "Nobody deserves anything, good or bad. It's all grace. If you accepted that, you might be able to relax a little" (*Home* 271). Boughton, despite his faults, is a reflexively gracious character. He does not assume the best of Jack, but he does forgive all his son's actions--even before he fully knows what they are.

#### The Case for a More Generous American Discourse

In her essays and interviews, Robinson expresses her frustration with the state of mutual understanding in the context of democracy and civil discourse in America. She acknowledges that America is young and flawed, and yet, Robinson believes, it is--or was-- characterized by a spirit of independence and generosity. Increasingly, however, she writes, that generosity is fading:

"I had always thought that the one thing I could assume about my country was that it was generous. Instinctively and reflexively generous. In our history, and with the power that has settled on us, largely because of the tendency of the old Western powers to burn themselves down and blow themselves up, we have demonstrated fallibilities that are highly recognizable as human sin and error, sometimes colossal in scale, magnified by our relative size and strength. But our saving grace was always generosity, material and, often, intellectual and spiritual. To the extent that we have realized or even aspired to democracy, we have made a generous estimate of the integrity and good will of people in general, and a generous reckoning of their just deserts. I hate even to admit that I fear this may have begun to change" ("Value" 176).

Robinson's assessment of America as a "reflexively generous" nation extends to Americans themselves. Gilead, Iowa, in the 1950s seems to be an extremely ordinary setting, but Robinson is intentional about using it to serve her point about generosity. She places her characters in a tiny small town in the Midwest and gives them ordinary names and ordinary lives. Nothing about any of them is implausible, because she intends for them to be understood as examples of the expansive nation of vastly different, yet equally valuable individual souls that is America. Robinson's characters extend grace and generosity to each other at the end of each of the three books--not just because they feel they "have to" because of their Christianity, but because they realize that it is the only way they can truly connect with each other.

So for Robinson, democracy, like grace, is an equalizer. It calls on us to "assume well about other people," as Robinson says ("A Conversation" 289). She does not argue for naive optimism, but instead for a humanism that accepts the glaring flaws in humanity and pushes past them to the light and grace that she thinks is innate to all of us. At the end of *Gilead*, John Ames writes to his son about the value of this life and the power that each of us have to do something with it:

"I think there must also be a prevenient courage that allows us to be brave--that is, to acknowledge that there is more beauty than our eyes can bear, that precious things have been put into our hands and to do nothing to honor them is to do great harm. And therefore, this courage allows us, as the old men said, to make ourselves useful. It allows us to be generous, which is another way of saying the same thing." (*Gilead* 246)

Robinson maintains the importance of wonder in our treatment of others, on both a personal and a national level. She argues for humility, for understanding that we cannot know everything in and about this life, and for empathy. Robinson describes the human experience as a mystery:



“Touch a limit of your understanding and it falls away, to reveal mystery upon mystery. The one great lesson we can take from the study of any civilization is the appropriateness of reverence, of awe, and of pity, too. This would be a good thing for the citizens of a powerful democracy to remember” (“Decline” 119). Through her characters, Robinson depicts the appropriate response to living in this world alongside other broken, frail, innately flawed people. That response is generosity, and bravery, and grace. All these things connect us.

Connection, then, is Robinson’s key to participation in this life. Without it, we remain “secrets to each other,” as Robinson describes it, and increasingly aware of our loneliness. For her, and her characters, it is only through gracious, authentic relationship--which begins with awe and wonder at the glorious, radiant image of God that each person bears--that we can begin to understand how to address injustice and suffering. Relationship is the bridge over the vast, unexplainable differences between us and between our experiences, and we have to use the forms available to us--religion, language, belief--to create that relationship. This requires the courage to act justly, to assume integrity and good intention of the others participating in our democracy, and to love those around us not because we “have to,” but because they are just as worthy of love as we are. All this requires a personal commitment to patience and generosity, which are synonymous, in this case, with grace. Extending this grace to another person, as Ames, Jack, and Lila do, is acknowledging the “precious things that have been put into our hands.” Robinson uses her books to present the idea that there is a reciprocity to forgiveness, and that is the love and liberation that we can offer to others. That is why she chooses to include the theme of civil rights in her narrative-- to give a practical example of one such way that we can liberate others. Simultaneously, Robinson presents the idea of the individual soul being “light within

Light.” She believes it is possible to glimpse eternity in each person. And that makes this life just as important as the next one—because they aren’t so far apart, after all. The human lives we touch in our time on earth are eternally important, and so, therefore, is making what changes we can to reduce injustice, and human suffering. The opportunity to do this presents itself everywhere. We need only the courage to see it.

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