**“Homesick for a place I never left”:**

**Marilynne Robinson, Democracy**

**and the Mystery of American Belonging**

**through the post-Christian eyes of Millennial Brits**

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Abstract:

This chapter explores the challenges of teaching *Gilead* (2004) by Marilynne Robinson to British undergraduates. Robinson is a writer whose work wrestles and recuperates the apparently contradictory legacies of Puritan and Transcendentalist thought. The chapter argues that the intellectual generosity embodied in Robinson’s work is subversive and a crucial challenge to contemporary British sensibilities. It also endorses Amy Hungerford’s view that ‘[Robinson’s] novels imagine belief made capacious, and aim to show us behavior within the life of belief that can heal both family and Republic’ (2010). The theological richness of her writing offers a particular pedagogical challenge in an apparently post-Christian culture, one in which it can no longer be taken for granted that biblical tropes will be recognized or be regarded as meaningful, especially for a contemporary European readership born in the late twentieth or early twenty-first century. Robinson’s ‘Gilead’ narrative sequence emphasizes the validity of embracing the mystery of everyday life and might be read as a distinctively American defense of liberalism and religious tolerance. In *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (1998), Robinson observes that “[d]emocracy is profoundly collaborative. It implies a community. It seems to me we have almost stopped using the word in a positive sense.” The chapter explores the challenges of addressing questions of religious belief, selfhood and race in contemporary fiction and in the context of twenty-first-century British Higher Education.

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson; Gilead; Christianity; race; democracy; self.

Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* (2004), the first installment in a gradually expanding sequence that includes *Home* (2008), *Lila* (2014) and *Jack* (2020), presents its prospective teachers and readers with a series of formal, thematic and ethical challenges. Set in the titular, fictional mid-Western Iowan town in 1956, *Gilead* takes the form of a single, long letter written by a Congregationalist minister, the Reverend John Ames, to his only living child, as he anticipates his own mortality. The vivid drama of an inner life, one marked by grief and regret as well as joy and devotion, is both a narrative strength and potential stumbling block for students. How, for example, might students respond to a novel that focuses on a relatively privileged white Christian minister? Ames reflections take place in a single year but his memories stretch back to the late nineteenth-century and are haunted by the racism of America’s past, a hateful reality that also troubles its present.

This chapter addresses a number of the interpretative problems that I have encountered in teaching the novel in the context of British Higher Education: questions of religion, grief, selfhood and race are all crucial to Robinson’s writing. These subjects are difficult to explore in any circumstances. However, I want to argue that *Gilead* encourages sensitive, attentive and respectful dialogue about issues of ultimate concern. I taught *Gilead* as the final text on a twenty-week survey course of American Literature from 1900 designed for final-year undergraduates, that ran across the academic year from October to May. The ambition and range, tempered by the necessary selectivity, of this upper-level module is signaled in the fact that it featured strands focusing on American Modernism, the Harlem Renaissance and the South as well as a term dedicated to post-1960s writing. *Gilead* concluded a 10 week period that incorporated, for example, Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), Annie Proulx’s composite novel *Close Range* (1999), and short fiction by Gloria Anzaldúa, Jhumpa Lahiri and Leslie Marmion Silko. By the time that students arrived, sometime in Spring, in Robinson’s fictional Iowan town, they should have acquired a strong sense of the diversity of contemporary American writing, coupled with an awareness that the syllabus would always be limited by constraints of time. One of the joys of contributing to a team taught, year-long survey module is seeing the connections that students make between apparently disparate narratives and forms.

The novel is, by any measure, celebrated: it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2005; President Barack Obama famously named it as one of his favourite novels; and it is the subject of scores of academic journal articles, book chapters and edited collections. Yet the critical acclaim is not without nuance or contention. For example, Christopher Douglas recognizes Robinson’s artistic achievement but argues that *Gilead* ‘evade[s]’ certain deeply uncomfortable truths about American Christianity’s mainstream support for slavery in the nineteenth century (2011, 340). For Amy Hungerford, by contrast, ‘[Robinson’s] novels imagine belief made capacious, and aim to show us behavior within the life of belief that can heal both family and Republic’ (2010, 121). This is no small claim and one that reimagines the apparent modesty of the lives she evokes so delicately in *Gilead* and its sibling texts. In an era when White Christian nationalism appears to have a substantial following, and one in which both the aggressive anti-intellectualism of the Religious Right and the vituperative rhetoric of ‘New Atheists’ or anti-theists seem to dominate, the ability to ‘imagine belief made capacious’ is both rare and precious. Robinson is also prepared to address the big challenges to religion in general and Christianity in particular. In one essay, she phrases the question in stark terms: ‘Does religion manifest a capacity for deep insight, or an extraordinary proneness to delusion?’ (2010*,*  12). I want to argue that the intellectual generosity embodied in Robinson’s work is subversive and a crucial challenge to contemporary British sensibilities, for readers of any age, regardless of academic stage.

I. *Puritan Legacies, Biblical Echoes*

The decelerated style and theologically-inflected, meditative tone of *Gilead* is very different from the kind of exuberant experimental narratives we might expect to thrive in early twenty-first century America. However, Rachel Sykes locates the novel in a tradition of post-millennial fiction that has returned to a ‘quiet aesthetic of narrative’ as an alternative to the noisy action that dominates the contemporary novel (2017, 108). This is a compelling novel in which not very much happens. *Gilead* makes demands of its readers – of attentiveness, patience, discernment – that are both attractive and quietly complex. Sykes notes that the ‘epistolary form also structures the quiet of its prose’ and it ‘is technically quiet because the interiority of its narrative style provides little dialogue’ (2017, 112). This lack of dialogue, alongside a relative lack of dramatic incident, is one of the potentially disorientating elements of the narrative. It is also unusually replete with religious references: not just biblical allusions but quotations from John Calvin and Ludwig Feuerbach and digressive, meditative explorations of the relationship between heaven and earth. Robinson not only self-identifies as a Christian, her work is deeply concerned with the living relationship between theological commitment and the challenges of contemporary polity. In a conversation with President Barack Obama, the novelist states that

I believe that people are images of God. There’s no alternative that is theologically respectable to treating people in terms of that understanding [. . .] It seems to me as if democracy is the logical, the inevitable consequence of this kind of religious humanism at its highest level (2015, 287).

Robinson’s body of writing, both her fiction and creative non-fiction, is infused with a sense of the divine in everyday life; spirituality is not represented as an ethereal or esoteric category but something that is integral to quotidian life. In Andrew Cunning’s memorable phrase, she might best be described as a ‘theologian of the ordinary’ (2021). Not all theological readings of the novel insist that its core is shaped by a wholly conventional Christian belief. Andrew Ploeg, for example, argues that *Gilead* presents a ‘markedly unorthodox notion of divinity’ (2016, 3).

However traditional or progressive its implicit theology might be, it is not possible, or wise, to play down the importance of religion when teaching the novel*.* As Alison Jack has observed, ‘[f]aith is a foundational principle in [. . .] *Gilead*,’ (2018, 100). The very title of the novel is a biblical allusion: the eponymous fictional town takes its name give to a number of regions and people in biblical literature and translates from the Hebrew as ‘hill of testimony or mound of witness’ (see, for example, Genesis 31.47-8). Intriguingly, Margaret Atwood also uses this source for her fictional North American theocratic dystopia, the Republic of Gilead, in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and its sequel *The Testaments* (2019). Indeed, Douglas regards Atwood’s highly influential speculative narrative as ‘the intertext to which [Robinson’s] title refers’ (2011, 340). It is likely that the name now has a certain resonance because of Atwood’s novel sequence and its long running television adaptation (2017-). However, I do not assume that either biblical allusion or the forms of piety to which Ames or his creator subscribe will be immediately legible to undergraduates in twenty-first-century Britain. This is not caused by a lack of empathy or a readerly inability to connect with protagonists whose lives may be radically different form their own. We simply cannot take for granted that the specifics of Ames’ Christian belief continue to make sense. This challenge is not wholly dependent on national context: it is not difficult to imagine that some American undergraduates might struggle to recognize or assimilate the range of theological references and biblical allusions. Nevertheless, traditional or confessional Christian commitment in the UK is less common than in the US. Following the census of 2011, for example, the Office for National Statistics reported that despite the fact that Christianity remains the biggest single religion, a steep decline of those who identify themselves to be Christian (from 72.7% in 2001 to 59.3% in 2011) (Anon, 2011). The same report indicates that just over a quarter of the population (14.1 million) identified with no religion at all. The overall religious context is plural, diverse and in flux. To be clear, I have taught students of many different faiths and spiritual convictions. Atheists, Christian and Muslim students, for example, are frequently open and eloquent in engaging with the kinds of question that might be prompted by theologically-oriented writing. It is, however, wrong to make any particular assumptions about the familiarity of university students with Judeo-Christian ideas, language or narrative. When I have introduced *Gilead* in lectures, I gloss the biblical origins of the term – and its wider use in popular culture – but I also address Robinson’s attitude towards the Bible by sharing a quotation from her essay collection, *The Death of Adam* (1998):

Literacy became virtually universal in Western civilization when and where it became to seem essential for people to read the Bible. All the immeasurable practical benefits that came with mass literacy, its spectacular utility, awaited this unworldly stimulus. Clearly, mere utility is not enough to sustain it at even functional levels, though the penalties of illiteracy are now very severe. Reading, above the level of the simplest information, is an act of great inwardness and subjectivity, and this is why and how it had such a profound meaning while it did – the soul encountered itself in response to a text – first Genesis or Matthew and then *Paradise Lost* or *Leaves of Grass* (2005, 9).

The argument gives a significant insight into the Robinson’s worldview: she makes no distinction between the aesthetic and ethical value of the Bible; the literacy that was promoted by Protestant reformers shaped the gift of reading for text that would both be written in response to it, such as Milton’s Puritan epic, and those that ostensibly rebel against strict interpretations of scripture such as Walt Whitman’s sensual and celebratory Transcendentalist poetry. Some, but not all, students who read *Gilead* on this final-year American Literature to 1900 module, were familiar with both the Puritan origins of the nation and its imaginative legacies from another optional module studied in year two of the degree programme. For those students who had read the devotional poetry of Anne Bradstreet (1612-72), for example, Ames’ vivid interior life and his quiet wrestling with biblical stories, may have been familiar but this knowledge could not be assumed and, in any case, it seemed sensible to revisit the basic ideas.

*The Death of Adam* and *Gilead* both register the significance of Puritan ways of reading the world that once shaped America but which have long since been regarded with scepticism and horror by progressive readers, perhaps especially in universities. Part of Robinson’s project is to recuperate the importance of Calvinist ideas as key to the liberal and democratic ideals of America at its best. Her work is a reminder that the Puritan tradition itself was a rich and mixed one; its eyes were not so fixed on heaven that its adherents took no pleasure in this world. The emphasis on ‘inwardness and subjectivity’ in the quotation from *The Death of Adam* is particularly vivid since these are phenomena that are perhaps most commonly associated with Romanticism or, in America, with the Transcendentalists. However, this statement is useful in indicating that ideas of American interiority may have a much older history. Sacvan Bercovitch famously declared a belief ‘that the Puritan legacy to subsequent American culture lies not in theology or logic or social institutions, but in the realm of the imagination (1974 , 7). *Gilead* might be seen as part of this imaginative inheritance and I have consistently found Bercovitch’s claim illuminating when exploring the displaced spirituality of much post-1800 American literature.

*Gilead* does not only use a biblical name for its title: it also engages with one of Jesus’ most memorable stories, the parable of the prodigal son, as a key structuring and thematic device. In the context of the lecture or seminar room, I might briefly introduce this much retold story in the following way: after rejecting the strictures of family life, partying away an inheritance and, finally, begging to eat with pigs, an impetuous young man is welcomed home by a father who is overjoyed to see him (Luke 15. 11-32). The New Testament does not make a fetish of perfect homes or happy families either. Jesus has some uncomfortable words, for example, about the cost of following him for family relations (Matthew 10. 34-35). Homelessness, a lack of a fixed domestic space, is also a key element of the gospel story: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head,” Jesus tells his followers (Luke 9. 59). This statement, that seems to be both lament and warning, haunts our restless – *homeless* – twenty-first century hearts and minds. The man of sorrows certainly does not offer much by way of mortgage advice. The profligate-turned-penitent son from Luke’s gospel is not, we recall, an only child: he has an older, morally upright brother who is less than delighted with the generous reception afforded to his wayward sibling. The narrative of Jesus’ story is alluded to in many contemporary texts: Coupland’s *Hey Nostradaums!* (2003) ends with an inversion of the gospel story, as a penitent, once pitiless father awaits the (unlikely) return of a son whose forgiveness he craves. The allusion is neither covert nor vague and the last line of the novel paraphrases Luke’s gospel: ‘Rejoice! You must! My son is coming home!’ (2003, 244).

*Gilead* reworks the parable both openly and with the nuances that are vital in domestic drama. Forgiveness and return are similarly fundamental to the plot of *Gilead*. Ames’ narrative is both testimony and witness to the passing of history through a small, little-changing and widely uncelebrated settlement:

To me it seems rather Christlike to be as unadorned as this place is, as little regarded. I can’t help imagining that you will leave sooner or later, and that if you have done or mean to do it [. . .] I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love (282).

Can the narrator offer hospitality to one who has spurned the home that he loves? For much of the novel John Ames, a trusting man, distrusts his godson, Jack (whose full name makes him Ames’ namesake), who has returned to the town and family after years of disgrace and private pain. Their shared names and mirrored lives – the one stable, almost inert, the other itinerant, unsettled – suggests that they represent two potential paths for one man. The ailing minister knows precisely which character in the prodigal son parable he has been cast in: as the ‘good son [. . .] the one who never left his father’s house,’ he notes drily, ‘I am one of those righteous for whom the rejoicing in heaven will be comparatively restrained’ (272). As the younger man leaves town once again, the minister quietly offers him a blessing, a prayer that might consecrate both men. The pastor has witnessed much grief in his life, including the loss in childbirth of his first wife and the sorrow that his elder brother’s rejection of faith caused for his parents. Ames’ life of quiet service in a mid-West US town, he suspects, appears passive compared to the reckless, restless lives of his abolitionist grandfather, disgraced godson and apostate brother.

He, unlike his grandfather, father and brother, has never really left his home town and, bearing the names of both his father, a pacifist, and belligerent, justice-seeking grandfather, is ready to defend the ordinary grace of a rural, long unnoticed town. Ames recalls feeling shock at his father’s eventual contempt for their home: ‘I don’t recall that I actually said anything, taken aback as I was. Well, all he accomplished was to make me homesick for a place I never left’ (2005, 269). This incongruous homesickness, an estranging sensation for the minister, might inspire a mild envy in those who have never known the mysterious pull of place. *Gilead* is rare in its nuanced celebration of the everyday and evocation of the hope of a home yet to come. Robinson’s essays bear much evidence of her status as a scrupulous critic of nationalist hubris. However, she also notes that despite this capacity for arrogance or exceptionalism, Americans ‘persist in thinking that profundity only occurs elsewhere’ (2015, 282).

II. *Interiority and ‘the witness of the mind’*

A key problem for any student of literature is how human consciousness, in all its complexity, might be figured in narrative. How, for example, does John Ames choose to make himself known to his son and, implicitly, to those readers who are eavesdropping on this private correspondence? Robinson’s writing has frequently turned to the questions of interiority and its relationship with the outside world, with the self in tension with community. One issue on which marks the writer out from some of her peers in late modernity, however, is her trenchant defence of the integrity of the self as something more than an a mere assemblage of data and desires. In *Absence of Mind* (2010), originally delivered as part of the prestigious Terry Lectures ‘on religion in the light of science and philosophy’ at Yale University, Robinson cites Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ‘The American Scholar’ (1837) and its evocation of ‘the great paradox and privilege of human selfhood [. . . ] a privilege foreclosed when the mind is trivialized or thought to be discredited’(2010, xviii). The subtitle of the lectures, ‘The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self’, gives some sense of Robinson’s quietly combative approach to what she calls ‘parascientific literature’ (2010, 32).

In my experience, this ‘great paradox’ is one that continues to fascinate students: not, I should add, because they are any more prey to egotism than any other previous generation of human beings but as part of a visible quest to understand the rights and responsibilities that are marks of our agency. A clerical figure such as John Ames may find peace in markedly different places to most twenty-first-century British undergraduates who are statistically less likely to look to holy scripture or church tradition. In *Absence of Mind* Robinson identifies‘the modernist impulse to discredit the witness of the mind’ (*2*010, 56). Ames, like Robinson, rejects this ‘impulse’ – in his terms an ‘insidious’ critique of Christianity that regards religious experience itself as an ‘illusion’. For Ames, ‘it is religious experience above all that authenticates religion, for the purposes of the individual believer’ (165-6). The emphasis on authenticity connects with both people of faith and those who may take a more secular perspective. The common ground is a suspicion of artifice, manipulation and deceit, both public and private. Robinson returns to an exploration of self and other in ‘Limitation’ (2015), an essay that addresses the theological question of the incarnation, or ‘the mystery of a divine self’:

There are times when selfhood feels like exasperating captivity, times when it feels alone with its ghosts, times when it feels confident in its particular resources, times when it is deeply disappointed with itself, distrustful of itself. Yet it is a constant in experience (2015, 262).

 Ames’ melancholy, hopeful epistle blends personal and family history with theological reflection and, less explicitly, a narrative of political guilt. None of this sounds, ostensibly at least, either very exciting or especially problematic. Readers are not asked to find sympathy for a serial killer or self-confessed racist. The fact, however, that it is narrated, uninterrupted in the voice of privileged, white Christian man is a distinctive challenge for thinking about interiority. The novel asks its readers to make an empathetic connection with a person whose experience, and beliefs, may well be far removed from their own. This voice is singular, vividly realized voice; one marked by meditation, grief and wistfulness. Yet is he also unaware, at some level, of his own social advantages and lack of political engagement? This is a question that students may well ask and one which to there is no simple answer. Sykes observes that ‘quiet can become a way for the privileged to disengage from the world that surrounds them, and Robinson stops short of valorizing quiet by illustrating its limitations as a mode of engagement in the present’(2017, 115). We might find provisional answers in the spaces between the things that Ames says and those that he fails to address.

At a thematic level, the novel is concerned with complex and not very fashionable theological, and historical questions. The author, suggests James Wood, perhaps ‘sensitive to the piety of *Gilead* [. . .] subverted this potential traditional objection by making her novel swerve away from the traditionally novelistic’. The result is, he argues, ‘less a novel than a species of religious writing’ and Ames’ epistle is ‘a recognisable American form, the Emersonian essay, poised between homily and home, religious exercise and naturalism’ (2019, 448).

 In *Absence of Mind*, Robinson notes that ‘[t]here is something uniquely human in the fact that we can pose questions to ourselves about ourselves, and questions that actually matter, that actually change reality’ (2010, 32). A key issue to address with student might take its queue from this statement. How does John Ames pose questions of himself and of his reader(s)? The ailing narrator, who has been diagnosed with heart failure, recognizes that he will not live to see Robby, aged six during the narrative, grow up and achieve adulthood. Ames contemplates mortality, reflects on memories of his circumscribed, grief-struck but faith-filled life and addresses his hopes for the good life that he hopes his son will live. The potential difficulty is not so much the fact that the narrator is a man of faith but that Ames is so very different from the kind of minister normally found in fiction. As Wood observes, clerical narratives ‘overwhelmingly’ present priests ‘as comical, hypocritical, improperly worldly or a little dim [. . . ] we want our sepulchers craftily whited’. Robinson, however, does not follow the rulebook of Geoffrey Chaucer, Graham Greene and Anthony Trollope, and, instead creates a pastor who is ‘gentle, modest, loving and, above all good’ but also ‘rather boring’ (2019, 447). Although there are important ways in which readers might wish to question both the absolute nature of Ames’ ethical decency and the use of ‘boring’ as an epithet, Robinson’s narrative is too subtle to make him an unreliable narrator. However, Ames’ ‘curious lack of ego’ is significant (Wood 2019, 447). He has been a lonely figure for much of his life but has always retained a belief in the possibility of connecting with other selves. This is vividly figured in his description of the sacrament of baptism which he evokes as ‘[t]he sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time’ (26).

How might it be possible for a twenty-first-century, agnostic or atheist reader to connect with such a specifically spiritual figure? The pastor, despite his deep piety, is not unfamiliar with the challenges of European thought to traditional theism and, indeed, is sympathetic to honest disbelief, provided that it is scrupulous and authentic. His brother’s theological skepticism, for example, nurtured by the writing of Feuerbach, is represented as a plausible counterpoint to his own quiet, tolerant orthodoxy. Ames, unlike young members of his congregation who appear ‘flumoxed by the possibility of unbelief’, does not favor a modernist practice of providing evidence for the objective truth claims of historic Christianity: ‘Because nothing true can be said about God from a posture of defense’ (201-2). This might be a kind of article of faith for Robinson’s body of writing. Whether exploring the specifics of Christian ideas – forgiveness, conversion or salvation, for example – or concepts that move beyond theology (memory, freedom of thought, democracy) – she avoids defensiveness. ‘Triumphalism was never the friend of reason,’ argues Robinson in *Absence of Mind* (2010, 20-21). This understated critique of self-congratulation might be a fair description of our polarized era, a time in which humility is viewed as weakness.

For Rowan Williams, *Gilead* and its connected narratives challenge a commonplace assumption that the novel, as it arose as a distinct form in the eighteenth century, is primarily individualist. Against such a view, this mode of writing, he suggests, ‘again and again can display to us the ways in which we’re connected with one another before we realize it, so that we can never be “good” on our own definition because we’re never anything on our own definition’. Human beings, he argues, are ‘*implicated –* tangled and embedded in relations we have not chosen’ (2019, 157-8). This concept of being ‘*implicated’* connects with the novel’s most challenging, and potentially problematic, aspect: its representation of race in relation to American identity and religion.

III. ‘*Dust and ashes’: Gilead, Religion and Race*

‘Contempt for the past surely accounts for a consistent failure to consult it,’ writes Robinson in *Absence of Mind* (2010, 29). This might be an epigraph for our times. It is also a useful way of addressing an aspect of *Gilead* that its narrator finds painful and, to some extent, cannot confront: the reality of racism that America, and Gilead itself, has not overcome. It is also a vital issue to explore when discussing the novel in almost any context. The fictional town had radical origins as part of the abolitionist movement for which Ames’ grandfather fought. As he tells Grace, the daughter of his best friend, ‘in the old days towns like ours were a conspiracy. Lots of people were only there to be antislavery by any means that came to hand’ (180). In an essay called ‘Who Was Oberlin?’, Robinson writes that Gilead ‘was modeled on Tabor’, a town ‘in the southwest corner of Iowa [. . .] founded by a group from Oberlin [. . .] It was intended to serve, and did serve, as a fallback for John Brown and others during the conflict in Kansas’ (2012, 180). The novel, in one sense, is tacitly about the failure of the town, including John Ames, to honour the sacrifice of abolitionist figures like Captain John Brown (1800-1859) and those for whose liberty he fought.

There are, not surprisingly, a range of quite different critical views on the ways in which race is represented, or avoided, in the novel. There are a number of articles that would be useful for students to read alongside the novel. Alison Jack, for example, argues that ‘race is an implicit rather than explicit area of concern’ in *Gilead* (2018, 101). In an article that focuses on Robinson’s representation of baseball in relation to historical amnesia, Susan Petit observes that *Gilead* and *Home* are ‘clearly concerned with the evils arising from American slavery and the failure of Reconstruction, including the sort of white racism that exists in the absence of other races and takes the form of indifference to the consequences of prejudice’ (2012, 119).

 Ploeg praises the novel for its ‘nuanced’ exploration of a range of issues, in particular, ‘the church’s historical complicity in slavery and persistent racism’ (2016, 4). Douglas offers a more astringent critique of *Gilead.* He argues that the ‘ethical topography’ of the novel is situated in a question about the connection between the specifics of American religious practice and its history of enslavement: ‘in the face of one of the great national sins, what form should Christian resistance take?’ (Douglas 2011, 335). This challenge, always pertinent, has strong resonance in the post-Trump era, one in which the Black Lives Matter movement has brought international awareness to the appalling reality of judicial violence against people of colour. In my experience, students are more politically aware than at any time in the last 30 years, including my own undergraduate days in the 1990s. *Gilead* subtly draws attention to the complex, and often contradictory position, of American Christian churches in relation to racism. However, given that it is narrated from a single perspective, that of a white pastor, it does not – and cannot – have the resources or range to reflect the depth of the historical injustice.

Ames is a man who has lived through three vast conflicts. He was born less than twenty years after the Civil War and witnessed both World Wars. The pastor recalls the counterintuitive celebrations that took place when America ‘got involved’ in WWI: ‘we already knew what a miserable thing it was we were sending our troops off to’ (98). A major trauma in Ames’ life is the schism between his grandfather and father – both preachers – about the correct action for people of faith against slavery. His grandfather was an active abolitionist who joined Captain John Brown in armed struggle: he ‘preached his people into the war, saying while there was slavery there was no peace, but only a war of the armed and powerful against the captive and defenseless’ (115). Ames’ father, by contrast, was a pacifist who rejected the calls to insurrection. This dialetic between peace and action – a privileged choice for white men, one not granted to those who were enslaved – informs the narrator’s own sense of guilt almost a century later. Elizabeth Abele, responding in part to an article byChristopher Leise, suggests that the novels ‘seem to question the validity of the softer Calvinism of Boughton and the two younger John Ameses, as religious leaders of a peace without justice’. *Gilead*, in particular, she notes, *‘*uncovers the restless soul of John Brown—a martyr whose radical dreams of racial equality have yet to be realized’ (2017, 4).

Ames’ grandfather is remembered not just as a ghostly presence in his fragmented memories but also via a specific textual source: a short sermon, one that Ames’ pacifist father encouraged the older man to transcribe and which he later ‘buried and unburied’. This transcribed sermon adds another voice to the narrative, one marked by visionary experience and righteous anger. The preacher spoke of a youthful encounter with the Lord: ‘And He spoke to me, very clearly [. . .] Free the captive. Preach good news to the poor. Proclaim liberty throughout the land’ (200). He also recalls Ulysses S. Grant’s description of Iowa as ‘the shining star of radicalism’, a term that seems bitterly ironic to a preacher who has witnessed the refusal of white citizens to pursue the liberty of enslaved and oppressed: ‘What is left here in Gilead? [. . .] Dust and ashes’ (200). In her reading of the novel’s fire imagery and its connection with race, Lisa Bailey Siefker observes that Ames has ‘reduced’ the burning of Gilead’s African American church to a ‘small incident’ (2010, 268). In many way this pastor, so alert to human suffering and failure, is not able to recognize the truth about the town he loves. The narrative eventually reveals that Jack, Ames’ prodigal-like godson, has a deeper reason for his sense of alienation from Gilead, a place that has done nothing to combat the racism of the recent past. Jack is in committed relationship with an African American woman with whom he has a child. Racist laws, and the disapproval of his prospective father-in-law for religious reasons, prevent them from marrying. Gilead, with its abolitionist history, might have been a potential place of sanctuary but it becomes clear that Jack’s return will be temporary, in part because Gilead no longer remembers, or honors, these roots.

This failure is something that is likely to trouble contemporary readers but *Gilead* is not a comforting novel, despite its narrator’s attempt to offer consolation and hope to his son and, implicitly, to his other potential readers. It is also too much to assume that one contemporary novel will be adequate to consider such a vast, and ongoing, social injustice. Douglas describes Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) as the novel’s ‘key intertext’, observing that in both texts ‘the moral question of slavery attains national significance as examined through the prism of family memory’ (334). If, in the near future, I have the opportunity to teach *Gilead* – or, indeed, any of its sibling narratives – I would place it in a three week sequence with both *Beloved* and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016). The latter novel offers a different, and defamiliaring, perspective on the realities of slavery, especially in relation to the agency, and fight for liberty, of African American individuals and communities.

IV. Conclusion

‘Democracy is profoundly collaborative,’ observes Robinson in *The Death of Adam*. ‘It implies a community,’ she continues, but that it ‘also seems [. . . ] we have almost stopped using the word in a positive sense, preferring “capitalism,” which by no means implies community, and for which, so far as I have seen, our forebears found no use at all’ (2005, 149). Community implies both shared values and the space for disagreement as a mode of honouring liberty, in its truest sense, and not simply as an individualist pursuit of personal gratification. More recently, Robinson has cited Walt Whitman’s claim in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) that democracy ‘is a great word whose history remains unwritten, I suppose, because that history is yet to be enacted’ (2012, x). It is worth emphasizing, when discussing the novel with British undergraduates as much as in the United States, that the ideals to which both Whitman and Robinson aspire in their writing are a continuing and contested project, one that must be imagined before it can be ‘enacted’. Gilead derives its vitality, in part, from its quiet non-conformism: it does not match expectations of contemporary American fiction and presents particular challenges for a younger British readership that is not necessarily attuned to its author’s liberal, but orthodox, Christianity. By her own admission, Robinson likes to go against the grain of simplistic cultural expectations. In her introduction to *The Death of Adam,* Robinson describes the approach of her essays as ‘contrarian in method and spirit’ (1998, 1). This way of thinking indicates ‘that the prevailing view of things can be assumed to be wrong, and its opposite, being its image or shadow, can also be assumed to be wrong [ . . .] there are other ways of thinking, for which better arguments can be made’ (1998, 1). *Gilead* invites its readers – in any national context – to address the possibilities of making ‘better arguments’ and fighting for a more just world.

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