

Questions and Proposals about Marilynne Robinson's *Home*

Enclosed below are several questions about Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Home* (2008). The questions are organized into two sections: Section I, which is oriented toward formal description of the novel, and Section II, oriented toward content and theme. Prefacing Section 1 is a brief essay on the advantages to be gained from the descriptive approach to literature. The author of these questions is Emilie White, who directs the Kay Falk Literary Project at the Cathedral of All Souls in Asheville, NC.

The page numbers indicated below refer to the paperback, Picador reprint edition of *Home*, released in September of 2009.

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“Reading, done properly, is every bit as tough as writing.” –Zadie Smith

“As soon as you generalize, you are in a completely different universe than that of literature, and there's no bridge between the two.”
—Philip Roth

“It's funny, isn't it, Karamazov, all this grief and pancakes afterwards...” –Fyodor Dostoevsky

A Brief Essay Advocating a Descriptive Approach to Creative Literature

Over these last several months I have talked a lot about close reading, but not in a long time have I specified what I mean. Largely this has to do with the context in which we meet (not school), and also with the variety of individuals comprising our group. Some of us have a background and/ or education in literature, some do not; some are looking for an intensive literary experience from the book group, some are not. And each of us is valuable to the group. For those of you who are interested in learning more about close reading, I recommend several excellent books: for fiction, Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer*; basically anything by James Wood; anything by Lionel Trilling; Joshua Landy's *How to Do Things with Fictions* (forthcoming); Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House*; Robert Boswell's *The Half-Known World*; E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel*; Vivian Gornick's *The End of the Novel of Love*; and any criticism and/ or commentary by the writers you admire (I recommend the commentary of Edgar Allan Poe; Henry James's notebooks; Flannery O'Connor's letters and the essays collected in her *Mystery and Manners*; Anton Chekhov's letters; the lectures of Vladimir Nabokov; Gustav Janouch's *Conversations with Kafka*; Mavis Gallant's *Paris Notebooks*; Ralph Ellison's *Shadow*

and Act; and Willa Cather's *On Writing*.) For poetry, I recommend any criticism by Helen Vendler, Mary Kinzie, James Longenbach, Randall Jarrell, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Heather McHugh, Thom Gunn, Philip Levine, John Berryman, Richard Hugo, Robert Hass, Tony Hoagland, and Louise Glück.

For those of you who don't have time to pursue the titles and/or writers listed above, these study materials, right here, provide several questions oriented toward formal description of Marilynne Robinson's *Home*. These questions are intended to help you describe the novel's forms—describe them, if possible, apart from content. (I'm not at all happy with distinguishing between form and content, but for now to do so seems the clearest way to proceed.) The hope here is to help you to cultivate the practice of studying a work of creative literature really as though it were a foreign world -- a world whose "meanings" exist at all because of a unique formal arrangement that made those meanings possible. Describing in this way will help you avoid falling into (mere) generalization, (mere) reaction, and also mere judgment, or worship, of the novel's characters, or of the author. As I explained to members of the book group during our pot-luck last November, my art history professors would begin discussion this way—by asking students simply to describe the work of art under consideration, a reproduction of which would be projected on a screen at the front of the room. Sometimes that was all we would do, in a two-hour seminar—describe the work of art, just simply sit there and try to put into words what it looked like, and how it appeared to have been made. Of a painting by Mark Rothko, for instance, Student A might say: "It looks like the green field was put down first." Then would elapse a fairly excruciating silence during which the other students would be checking their observations against that of Student A. And then Student B would venture forth. "Yes," she might say, "the green field does look to have been put down first, but the fuzzy brush work in the red field seems to be confounding the notion of 'sequence,' of first, second and so forth." So laborious an address, and toward an object potentially so inspiring, may sound boring, and sometimes it was. It's work. Yet this sort of work must be in place before we can speculate an author's intention, which is when, in my experience, inspiration takes place—when we feel "spoken to," and when we may begin to sense ourselves as adequate to understanding what has been said.

Description effectively seats authority with the work, rather than with the reader. And if the encounter, reader-to-work, is happening in a group, description allows interpretation to proceed democratically. Anyone can describe. It doesn't matter whether you have a background in literature; and indeed, in my however many years of teaching, I have often found that the more innocent approach—and, along with innocence, the mindful approach, even the self-watchful approach—yields the deeper the insight. Someday I would hold a seminar with the All Souls Book Group on the similarities between Mindfulness Meditation and close reading. It does seem as though analogies of this sort—to the visual arts, to meditation—basically to media/ disciplines other than literature--can help.

But, back to the page: All that matters is that we stay with it, that we, to quote Joshua Landy again, “get out of the way” of the work, “efface” ourselves before it. This means quieting ego—hard to do, sometimes--and it also means resisting the understandable inclination to interpret the work according to bodies of knowledge the work is not--“templates,” as Betsy Gardner has called them. (In our discussions these “templates” have included various branches of psychoanalysis, the Enneagram, feminist theory, Other Works of Literature, theology, and all kinds of online research to find out “what the experts think.”) As we have reminded each other many times in our five year life together, a superior work of literature will establish within the imagination an entirely new “template,” if you will, one that exists only within that particular work, and exists for the reader only when she or he is reading it. So just focus on the work, even if doing so feels like being back in elementary school. Increasingly I will try to model this sort of address both in my questions and in discussion.

Here, then, are some formal elements of Marilynne Robinson’s *Home* to describe.

Section I: Descriptive Questions/ Form Questions

1.The Point of View/ Perspective

From whose point of view, or perspective, is this story told? In Robinson’s *Gilead*, we learn everything there is to know from one point of view, which is John Ames’s. Our experience of Ames’s family, of Gilead, of the Boughton family, and, most decisively for our experience of *Home*, of Jack Boughton, is filtered through the perception of John Ames.

Not so with *Home*. *Home* is told from the perspective of an outside narrator. Often, very often!, that narrator appears to be experiencing the story from Glory’s point of view. (But not always.) Here’s a very pointed question: Why is an outside narrator, who seems, at almost every point in the novel, to be Glory, the right kind of narrator for the story of *Home*? Please answer this question with consistent reference to the text.

Interesting: The point of view from which this story is told changes dramatically during the very last two paragraphs. How so? What’s happening during those paragraphs?

Another important aspect of the novel’s point of view to remember: The only mind we occupy in this novel is Glory’s. We never go into Jack’s mind, or Robert’s, or anyone else’s.

2. The language/ diction/ prose

In what kind of language does this narrator cast the story of *Home*? Here's a different way to ask this question, different in substance: How is the narrator's language *adequate* to the story of *Home*?

Another perhaps helpful way to think on this question: Marilynne Robinson is not a writer of a prevailing or signature "style." The way she writes changes from novel to novel. This has to do, I think, with the respectfulness of her address toward her subject matter. She finds a "style" adequate to the particular character/ story she's writing, and that's that. I find this remarkable. How is the writing here different from that of *Gilead*? For those of you who've read *Housekeeping*, how is it different from *Housekeeping*? Why must the prose/ language/ diction/ in *Home* be as it is for the story to sound "true?"

3. Where the story goes (or doesn't go) in space and time

This is not a story that satisfies for its plot-twists or its newfangled management of time. This is a story that moves slowly, that focuses intensely on only three people, and a story which also tends to stay in one place—-basically in one house (sometimes in the back yard of that house), occasionally venturing into the streets of Gilead, or to the Ames's home, or, once, into the countryside beyond Gilead. You'll also notice that the characters tend to talk about the same things again and again, energetically, for sure, but also exhaustively. So many ways to tell a story, aren't there. Just think of all the many ways Robinson could have told this one. She could have, for instance, included scenes of Glory's life away from Gilead. She could have introduced more characters into the story—-a relief for her reader, maybe, and maybe even a relief for Robinson. But she didn't do these things. If, for you, the choice she made is the right choice—-to stay essentially in one house for three hundred pages, having the same three characters enter and reenter the same conflicts again and again--why is it the right choice?

4. How is this story told?

Most of this story is told through **dialogue**—through people talking to one another. There's exposition here as well, and that's important. But for now I want to emphasize the prevalence of dialogue in *Home*. How is this choice the right choice for the story of *Home*?

(And as a once-upon-a-time fiction writer, I want to say that dialogue is hands down the hardest kind of fiction to write, because that's when you lose control over your characters. That's when they're at their most complex, when they're revealing dimensions you hadn't anticipated when they were just "thinking"--or when you, as their author, were thinking about them. I for one very much admire Robinson for the

energy it must have taken her to stay with Jack and Glory and Robert as they toiled for three hundred pages just trying to talk to one another. The only reason, as I see it, more novelists don't write novels this way is because the other ways are easier.)

5. Details, and what they say that isn't (can't be? won't be? could never be?) said in words

What are for you the novel's most revealing details? What I'm asking for here are those details suggestive of an emotion or significance that isn't said in words, this because the characters perhaps don't "know" that emotion yet, at least not consciously. For me, Robert's hair possesses this sort of life. Same with Jack's clothing. Same with Jack's laugh. Same with the framed picture of the river Jack keeps in his room--and which Glory gives to Della before Della leaves. You might look for details that recur, also for phrases that recur. Which, for you, are the especially revealing details in *Home*? What are they "saying"?

6. How Jack is shown/ How the novel knows Jack/ How we know Jack

This question overlaps with those above it, but I'll accord it its own because the Mystery of Jack—*is he good? is he bad? can he be saved? was he born to this? what's at the source of his "sadness," his "loneliness"?* what comprises his "soul," and while we're at it, what are we talking about when we say 'soul'?--is central to the novel, and to the lives of just about everyone in it. Do attend to how Jack's character is revealed in *Home*. Remember, at no point do we go inside his head—in either novel, *Gilead* or *Home*. Also note that we're not with him for certain crucial scenes, crucial to *him*. Think of all the letters he's written to Della—we don't read a single one. Think of that painful night in the barn—we only hear about it afterwards. We never go up to his room with him; we never come down from his room with him. The ways Jack is revealed, for most of the novel, are two: A) through the speculations of other characters, and, B) through dialogue—through what he says. He's also revealed, to a lesser extent—maybe encrypted is a better word!--through the objects in his room, or rooms (house and barn); and also through the revelations of the last pages of the novel. But he's never revealed decisively. So again, *describe*. What do you actually, experientially know of this man, and how do you know it?

7. The Tempo of the Novel

In an essay on Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, the critic James Wood describes *Anna Karenina* as having the "ample *lento* of life as we live it from day to day." (See James Wood, *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel*, p. 102.) I don't know if "ample *lento*" is how I would describe the tempo of *Home*—ample sounds spacious to me, whereas in *Home* I feel enclosed—but there is a slowness to *Home* which this randomly encountered observation of Wood's helped me to recognize. How would you characterize the novel's tempo? If that tempo seems instructive to you,

how does it seem instructive? Please be prepared to support your observations with evidence from the text.

8. Last, Hardly Least, Maybe First: How is Glory Shown?

Lastly, how is Glory shown? We tend to think of the novel as Jack's. And how could we not; everyone is always talking about Jack, including Jack. But what if this is really Glory's story? The last pages of the novel seem to suggest that it is. What do you think? Please refer to the text in your answer.

Section Two: Content/ Theme/ Issue Questions

1. *Being 'good?'* Or being *seen as 'good?'*

This problem—Am I being good, or am I acting this way rather to be *seen* as good—is central to the novel. We hear about it right away on page 6:

“They were attentive to their father all those years later, in part because they were mindful of their sorrow. And they were very kind to one another, and jovial, and fond of recalling good times and looking through old photographs so that their father would laugh and say, “Yes, yes, you were quite a handful.” All this might have been truer because of bad conscience, or, if not that, of a grief that felt like guilt. Her good, kind, and jovial siblings were good, kind, and jovial consciously and visibly. Even as children they had been good in fact, but also in order to be seen as good. There was something disturbingly like hypocrisy about it all, thought it was meant only to compensate for Jack, who was so conspicuously not good as to cast a shadow over their household. They were as happy as their father could wish, even happier. Such gaiety! And their father laughed about it all, danced with them to the Victrola, sang with them around the piano. Such a wonderful family they were! And Jack, if he was there at all, looked on and smiled and took no part in any of it.” (Marilynne Robinson, *Home*, p. 6)

Consider this dilemma—Am I being good, or am I acting this way, even feeling this way!, so as to be *seen* as good--as it pervades and shapes the life of the Boughton family. Obviously, the problem occupies Glory very differently than it does Jack, or than it does Robert. Please be prepared to support your considerations with evidence from the text.

2. A controversial proposal having to do with the inadequacy of prescribed righteousness to the real thing

Sometimes as I re-read this novel I see it as a story of the inadequacy of religiously prescribed righteousness to the real thing, to real righteousness. Yet equally as much the novel seems fundamentally sympathetic to religious life, even, in Glory's case (?), praising of it, certainly "at home" with it. Or, maybe if there is praise here, it is of the Lord. Maybe it is the Lord who is being praised, or glorified. Please, as you articulate your own sense of the problem, open the book and support your reflections with evidence from the text.

3. Race

The struggle for African American racial equality is central to the life of the Ames grandfather in *Gilead*, and to Jack Boughton in *Home*. Yet the problem of race takes up surprisingly little space, in both books. It is off to the side, talked about, and almost always according to the agenda of characters that were not involved in it directly. Why? Think about all the many ways this particular struggle could have figured in these stories. Robinson could have placed those stories in the foreground. She didn't. Instead the stories come to us mediated by the perspective of other characters, sometimes even suppressed, or distorted, by that perspective.

It seems to me that in *Home*, the reason the civil rights movement takes up as little "space" as it does is because the patriarch of that novel, Robert Boughton, won't accord it the attention it deserves. And Robert gets his way, doesn't he? Here's a controversial proposal: In *ourselves* not attending to the decisive importance of race for the lives both of the Ames and the Boughton families, perhaps we unwittingly collude with the culture embodied by Robert Boughton—with his close-mindedness, inattention, and failure of regard. That's right, I do mean to get your back up here—but in a way that will demonstrate just how high the stakes are in these "quiet" novels.

Thoughts? Agree? Disagree? Please be specific to the novel (s) in your answer.

4. Gender

What if Glory had been a woman? The novel asks this question, explicitly and poignantly, on p. 20. Indeed the novel's very structure is founded on Glory's being a woman, on being the one to receive a man's story, rather than the one to *have*, or to *be*, the story. Thoughts? Agree? Disagree? Please be specific to the novel in your answer.

5. Why Is Glory Named Glory (rather than the other options, which would have been Faith, Hope, Charity or Grace)

In accordance with the design of Robert Boughton, Marilynne Robinson had basically five Christian abstractions to choose from in the naming of her point of view

character, which is Glory. She could have named her Faith, Charity, Hope, Grace, or, the name she chose, Glory. Why do you think Robinson chose Glory? How is Glory...glory? How does Glory...glorify? Once you look up the word “glory” in the Oxford English Dictionary you’ll see how very complicated a word—and phenomenon—it is.

Glory, OED: 1. Exalted (now esp. merited) renown; honourable fame. ME. 2. Adoring praise and thanksgiving, esp. offered to God. ME. 3. The splendour and bliss of heaven. ME. 4. Replendent majesty, beauty, or magnificence; a feature of resplendent beauty or magnificence, a splendour (frequently in pl.) Also, an effulgence of light; fig. an imagined unearthly beauty. IME. 5. Something which brings renown; a special distinction, a splendid ornament. LME 6. Extreme vanity, boastfulness obs. exc. in VAINGLORY. 7. A state of exaltation, splendour, or prosperity. E17 8. A circle of light, esp. as depicted around the head or whole figure of Jesus or a saint a circle or ring of light; a halo. m17 b. spec. A luminous halo projected on to a cloud or fog-bank by the sun an anhelion. E19 9 A representation of the heavens opening and revealing celestial beings

And here is Robinson on reading the Oxford English Dictionary:

“The Oxford English Dictionary lets me follow the roots of words into the loamy depths of language. It lets me feel the abiding, generative life in it, the mysteries of its persistence and renewal.” (Thanks to Allan Campo for this quote.)

P.S. Hovering as we are over the dictionary, it seems we’re back in Emily Dickinson territory. Do you see any similarities between the writing of Emily Dickinson and Marilynne Robinson?

6. “Nothing to be done.”

There is a lot of very high-stake conversation in this novel--a lot of attempts, through talking, to right the past, to reconcile, to forgive. And, at many points in this novel, a character will say, at the end of one of these conversations, “Nothing to be done.” What do you think is being said with this refrain, “Nothing to be done”? This is perhaps as much a theological question as it is a plot/ story question (though *how* this question is theological is embedded within, really incarnated by, the particular story of *Home*.)

7. Psalm 139, What it Means to Jack, What it Means to the Novel

Please discuss the relevance of Psalm 139, in particular verses 7 – 12, to the story of *Home*, in particular to Jack. Jack quotes these verses to Glory on pages 287-288 in a conversation about what a “soul” is. It’s interesting that these are the verses

Jack supplies in endeavoring to answer this question. How do you think they matter to him, and to the story generally? Please be specific to the text of *Home* in your answer.

8. The question of what a “home” is

The question of “home” is explored in multifarious ways across Marilynne Robinson’s *Home*. Please contemplate the many meanings of “home” for Robinson’s novel. In doing so, please take out pen and paper and list the various homes in the novel, both the actual ones and the imagined ones. Where, or what, is “home” for Jack? For Glory? What will it be for Jack? What will it be for Glory? What is it for Della? For Robert, Jack’s son? For Robert, Jack’s father?

9. The parable of the Prodigal Son

How is the story of the Prodigal Son present within, even given new life by, Marilynne Robinson’s *Home*? This is a huge question, yes. And you can make it even huge-r by expanding your answer to include *Gilead* as well. Please be intensely specific to the novel (s) as you answer this question.

10. “What makes the book ultimately so powerful is the Reverend Boughton, precisely because he is not the soft-spoken sage that John Ames is in *Gilead*.”

Recently I read a review of *Home* by James Wood that included several provocative responses to the novel, including this one.

“What propels the book, and makes it ultimately so powerful, is the Reverend Boughton, precisely because he is not the soft-spoken sage that John Ames is in *Gilead*. He is a fierce, stern, vain old man, who wants to forgive his son and cannot. He preaches sweetness and light, and is gentle with Jack, like a chastened Lear (‘Let me look at you for a few minutes,’ he says), only to turn on him angrily.” (James Wood, “The Homecoming,” *The New Yorker*, September 8 2008).

Thoughts? Please be specific to the text as you organize them.

11. Outcast as Seer, Outcast as Bearer of Revelation;

My husband made an interesting observation the other night about Marilynne Robinson’s fiction, which is that in all three of her novels, the characters that see, the characters that must bear revelation, are outcasts, and that the outcast state seems necessary for revelation. The next interesting observation my husband made was that Robinson seems to recognize 20th century American middle-class life as defined by deracination; and the next interesting observation he made was that in a world in

which people habitually uproot themselves, moving from place to place, there is nowhere for revelation to go, nowhere for it to belong. What are your thoughts? Please be faithful to Robinson's fiction as you answer.

The kinds of "time" in Marilynne Robinson's fiction: On the other hand, maybe to see Robinson as writing about a contemporary phenomenon, such as deracination, is to risk missing a larger vision within her fiction of the phenomenon of time. Maybe Robinson is one of these extraordinary fiction writers who manage in a single novel to tell a story belonging to more than one kind of time—in Robinson's case, belonging to, and ever-attentive to, historical, material time, and, on the other hand, suggestive of a non-diachronic, perhaps trans-historical or non-earthly time-- a time perceivable only in part. In my experience of Robinson's fiction, I find that if I pay close attention to the development of single images, and/ or to the development of certain abstractions—and here we really are back in Dickinson territory--I begin to sense this alternate, non-comprehensible, only partially describe-able time. And what I'm suggesting here is not that Robinson is describing a time that's out there on its own, apart from, or before, her novel. What I mean to say instead is that she *creates* this time, she *makes* it, through the writing of her novel. For the reader, then, this time exists at all only while s/he's reading, only while she's inside the prose. (By the end of *Gilead*, John Ames, who has spent the novel writing, and reading back over his writing, understands this paradox very well.)

Look, for example, at the following paragraph from *Home*. Watch for how in a single sentence we move from destitution to restoration. It is the movement here I invite you to attend to, rather than to a stable kind of meaning of either one of these states.

"That odd capacity for destitution, as if by nature we ought to have so much more than what nature gives us. As if we are shockingly unclothed when we lack the complacencies of ordinary life. In destitution, even of feeling or purpose, a human being is more hauntingly human and vulnerable to kindnesses because there is the sense that things should be otherwise, and then the thought of what is wanting and what alleviation would be, and how the soul could be put at ease, restored. At home. But the soul finds its own home if it ever had a home at all." (282)

12. Another interesting remark made by James Wood in his review of Robinson's *Home*:

"Since the ego is irrepressible—and secular—it tends to bulge in odd shapes when religiously straightened."

Thoughts? Please be specific to the novel as you organize them.

13. “Jesus never had to be old”: Robinson’s realism about life’s hardships and how that realism informs her theology

Robert makes this remark—“Jesus never had to be old”—toward the end of the novel, on p. 313. For me, the remark sums up Robinson’s commitment to measuring the practice of Christian faith against the challenges of incarnate existence—in this instance, a challenge unimaginable even to Jesus, as “Jesus never had to be old.” With this proposal I am inviting you to consider Robinson’s realism, in both *Gilead* and *Home*, and how it seems to you to inform her theology, and vice versa. Thoughts? This question is big enough to warrant graduate study; maybe one way to make it manageable would be to pursue it within the context of only one relationship, in either *Gilead* or *Home*. You could also pursue the question by comparing Robinson’s “realism” with that of another fiction writer you admire.

14. *Home* and *Gilead* as anagogical literature, as “elevating” the spirit to “understand mysteries”

Persisting across the now five-year life of our book group has been the question of whether or not literature can habituate the mind to see the world from God’s point of view. (And here I am again referring to the video we watched of Stanford Professor Joshua Landy discussing, among other stories, Jesus’ parables. The video, entitled “The Role of Fiction in the Well-Lived Life,” can be viewed on the Internet.) Certain works of literature open onto this question more readily than others, and from my perspective, *Home* and *Gilead* (and *Housekeeping*) qualify as this kind of literature—as *anagogical* literature. “Anagogical” is defined by the O.E.D. as “spiritual elevation, esp. to understand mysteries.” To the credit of our book group, our conception of God has been a vulnerable one—vulnerable to being changed by experience, vulnerable to being renewed by it. And the medium of “experience” has been, for us, literature: stories, novels, poems, and essays. If you feel that *Home* has “elevated” you, or at least habituated you, to “understanding mysteries,” or to seeing the world from God’s point of view, how has it done so? And if *Gilead* has “elevated” you in this way, how has it done so? How have the two books worked *together* to elevate you in this way? What are you understanding now that you hadn’t understood before? This is a lovely question, but it’s also a huge and sort of floppy one, so please be specific to the novels as you answer it.

I also want to add that in our group we have read many stories, poems and novels written by dedicated agnostic and/or atheist materialists—Philip Roth, Anton Chekhov, Kay Ryan, Elizabeth Bishop, several others—and we have, again to our credit, met those writers on their particular terms and in their particular worlds.

15. The remarkable last line of *Home*

The last line of *Home* reads as follows: “The Lord is wonderful.”

Is it possible that this is what the novel has been doing all along—praising the Lord, or glorifying Him? How has the story of *Home* praised the Lord? Or, and this is a very different question: How has reading *Home* put you in mind of the wonderfulness of the Lord?

And if you are not Christian, and/ or are not religiously observant, and/or are observant within a religion other than Christianity, what do you hear in that last line?

Also, and this will confuse us, I’m sure: I hear that last line chorally—I hear multiple voices in it. One of the voices I hear is the author’s. I hear, in that line, authorial triumph. Do you? Or am I over-assessing?