

## Questions and Proposals about Marilynne Robinson's novel, *Gilead* (2004)

For future readers of these questions, the page numbers below are from both the Farrar, Straus and Giroux hardcover (2004) and Picador paperback (2006) editions of *Gilead*.

### **1. Fathers and sons**

Looked at one way, the book can be considered as an extensive (and rather fraught) meditation on the relationship of fathers to their sons. There are several father-son relationships in the book, both literal and figurative. There is the first and most obvious one, the epistolary relationship of John Ames, the narrator, to his young son (to whom he is writing the long letter which is the novel); there is the religiously embattled relationship of Ames's father to HIS father, both of whom, like Ames, were preachers; there is Jack Boughton, who has functioned as a prodigal son for both his biological father and for John Ames; and then there are Ames's theological ruminations on two father-son relationships in the Bible, that of Abram and Ishmael, and Abraham and Isaac.

That's a lot of fathers and sons for one book. And, of course, the reason they're all in there is because Ames wants to talk about them. It's Ames's mind that drives the story forward, which is to say that fathers and sons are much on his mind. The problems entailed in being a good father are preoccupying John Ames to an unusual degree.

For the sake of the upcoming discussion, let's propose the following: That John Ames, during the course of this novel, learns how to be a good father, though not so much to his seven year old son as to the forty-some year old Jack Boughton. Do you agree with this proposal? Why, or why not?

A sub-question to the above one: What is it about Jack Boughton's character that challenges John's so? Or, stated another way: How is Jack a foil for John? Or, stated yet another way: How is Jack Boughton John Ames's "prodigal son"?

### **2. The dispute between John Ames's father and grandfather over the meaning of Jesus' teachings**

*What would Jesus do?*

Probably all of us have asked that question at some point in our lives, as we've wrestled with a moral dilemma the solution for which isn't immediately apparent.

Sometimes, of course, the solution *is* apparent, but carrying it out will involve pain or difficulty, or, more lastingly, leading one's life in a manner less "practical" than those around us--and so, perhaps, leaving them behind. With that word "practical," I am referring to John Ames's grandfather, who, to quote the novel, "was never really a practical man again after that day," meaning, after the day he commits a violent act so as to protect the warring abolitionist, John Brown, and his men. It is "after that day" that the grandfather preaches while wearing a pistol in his belt and a bloodied shirt, this to demonstrate his belief that only war will "free the captive." For the grandfather, when Jesus extends his hand to us and puts it on our shoulder, it is as much in anger for what we have not done as in love and forgiveness for what we have.

His son (who is John Ames's father) hotly disagrees. In a searing argument, he tells his father, "I remember when you walked to the pulpit in that shot-up, bloody shirt with that pistol in your belt. And I had a thought as powerful and clear as any revelation. And it was, This has NOTHING to do with Jesus. Nothing. Nothing." (GILEAD, pp. 84-85)

I suspect we will want to talk in Book Group about the difference between the Jesus worshipped by John Ames's father and the Jesus worshipped by his grandfather. Do you consider that difference the result of the two men's different ages in the years leading up to the Civil War? After all, childhood would have exempted Ames's father from having to act (he was only ten at the time John Brown and his men hid out in his father's church.) Only as an older man, perhaps, looking back, could he have afforded the pacifism that his father, embroiled in that time and struggle, could not.

But maybe that's not right. Maybe the difference lies in the two men's characters. It will also be interesting to talk in Book Group about the character of the grandfather, about the ways his "impracticality" allows him to live every moment of his life with Jesus at his side. Note that Robinson has made the grandfather the most see-able and memorable character in the novel. Why do you think she has done so? Perhaps there is a figure like that in your own life, someone who emblemizes for you a kind of courage that's way further out there than your own. Perhaps you ultimately deemed that courage "impractical," even dangerous, yet its example continues to beckon. It does seem like we need our zealots, our radicals, our crusaders, precisely so we won't have to pay the price for living the crusade ourselves. Maybe that was true for the

fathers and sons of the Ames family--again, I have no settled opinions about this. But it will be interesting to take up these questions when we meet.

### **3. John Ames's character**

Do you think John Ames a believable character? Recently I spoke to a friend who does not think him believable, who says that he is "too good to be true." But another friend says that the threats posed by the young Jack Boughton draw out the "worst" in John Ames, thereby making a "human being out of him" (and therefore, presumably, believable.)

How do you weigh in? Here are some sub-questions to get you going.

At times it seems that the bewilderment and bitterness John Ames suffers over the figure of Jack Boughton threatens to corrupt his good character. But by the end of the novel, it's pretty clear that John Ames is going to be okay; despite some fierce temptation, he hasn't succumbed to hatred or "covetise" or other meannesses of spirit. Why? Do you think it was the fortitude of his character that overcame those threats, or do you think John Ames was, in a sense, saved? Or maybe it's *because* of Ames's practice as a Christian (which we could think of as the source of his fortitude) that he was saved. I mean to muddle your thoughts here productively.

### **4. "Sometimes I almost forget my purpose in writing this..."**

Like most long letters, especially those written on the eve of death, John Ames's to his son tends to digress from its stated purpose. Its fits and starts, its habit of looping around to its conclusions through long stories of luminously vivid detail, shows a man discovering, again and again, that he loves "this life." It also shows a man freshly challenged by the density of life, through feelings of covetise and paranoia stirred up by his encounters with Jack Boughton.

Occasionally Ames will see that he has lost his thread. At one point he says, "Sometimes I almost forget my purpose in writing this, which is to tell you the things I would have told you had you grown up with me, things I believe it becomes me as a father to teach you." (p. 133)

What do you think are John Ames's other purposes in writing to his son? What, for you, are the purposes that drive his writing that he is *not* aware of? In a sense, we can think of the letter as Ames's effort to control the way

he is perceived--both as the man he was, and as the man he will become in memory. Do you think he succeeds at that effort of control? What is Ames trying to create with this letter; what is he trying to preserve; and what is he trying to prevent?

Another rather provocative way to ask this question: Perhaps this novel, in its very structure, poses an equivalence between the loss of control entailed in Love, and the loss of control entailed in Death.

Do you agree? Disagree? Why?

##### **5. Times Flies Forgotten as a Dream--Ames's Writing his Way into Time**

This question has to do with the metaphysical or even theological discoveries John Ames makes through *writing*. These discoveries have to do with the effects of time and love on our sense of who we are.

The question occurred to me as I was reading p. 95 of the novel, which is where Ames first tells us about the ashy biscuit given to him by his father in the aftermath of the burning of the Baptist church. As you'll remember, Ames returns to this moment--let's call it the ashy biscuit moment--several times as the novel progresses.

"'Strange are the uses of adversity.'" That's a fact. When I'm up here in my study with the radio on and some old book in my hands and it's nighttime and the wind blows and the house creaks, I forget where I am, and it's as though I'm back in hard times for a minute or two, and there's a sweetness in the experience which I don't understand. But that only enhances the value of it. My point here is that you never do know the actual nature of your own experience. Or perhaps it has no fixed and certain nature. I remember my father down on his heels in the rain, water dripping from his hat, feeding me biscuit from his scorched hand, with that old blackened wreck of a church behind him and steam rising where the rain fell on embers, the rain falling in gusts and the women singing 'The Old Rugged Cross' while they saw to things, moving so gently, as if they were dancing to the hymn

almost...I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment. Grief itself has often returned me to that morning, when I took communion from my father's hand. I remember it as communion, and I believe that's what it was." (95)

If you look at this passage closely, you'll see Ames coming to a kind of revelation about the significance of this moment for him, which turns out to be a pretty big one: "I mention it again because it seems to me much of my life was comprehended in that moment."

But then go on and read the rest of the novel, and watch for what happens to the significance, even the contents, of the "ashy biscuit" moment. You'll see that moment change, its very contents change, as some of its first meanings "fly away"... "forgotten"... "as a dream." (That's the Isaac Watts hymn Ames recalls repeatedly as he writes his letter.) The story will change as Ames writes it; his effort to "preserve" his life through writing will in fact result in a "re-creation" of that life, and so a recreation of himself. "For Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment." The effort to "preserve" oneself through writing in Ames's case results in its opposite, in a re-creation of the self, and so a letting go. (And that letting go is possible because of...what? Ames's openness, his suppleness of spirit? The grace of God? Wonderfully, the novel never says. And, as is consistent with the wisdom both of his teaching and his fatherhood, Ames never says.) Could we think of this movement, "preservation-as-recreation," as the metaphysics of *Gilead*, even as the form of *Gilead*, the living form of *Gilead*?

Have you observations you'd like to add to mine? Please stay close to the novel as you contemplate these questions.

##### **5. The Horse in the tunnel**

What do you think about the horse in the tunnel, his body half visible above the earth? It's such an odd, uncanny-feeling, powerful image, sort of like, to quote Robinson, an image from an "extravagant" dream. Why do you think it's in the book?