

# Cherished Values and the Significance of Life in Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*

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## Abstract:

Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer-Prize-winning novel *Gilead* (2004) has received more dominant acclaim than intellectual attention. The novel has developed a warm and devoted attention from all readers. This paper highlights the cherished values in *Gilead*. Its aim is to elaborate the significance of three major values, namely, faith, family and education. It endeavors the complexity of these values that is interrelated to one another and intently represent the central tenets of the life worth living. The culturally formative text *Gilead* represents the specific values and has become one of the most popular works of the millennium. Therefore, this paper aims to concentrate the protected values and concerns the reality of the transience of life.

**Key words:** Values, significance, tenets, transience, complexity

*Didache*, an early Christian text by Aaron Milavec says:

Any community that cannot artfully and effectively pass on its cherished way of life as a program for divine wisdom and graced existence cannot long endure. Any way of life that cannot be clearly specified, exhibited and differentiated from the alternative modes

operative within the surrounding. Culture is doomed to growing insignificance and to gradual assimilation. (15)

Milavec's opinion of the early Christian life differs from the modern tensions of a culturally globalized world. But his observation on the thirst of a spiritual outlook for a cultured life in any society is still relevant today.

The culturally formative text, which highlights specific values, is one of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. This novel is one to be scrutinized and examined to life. The text is a part of the *Gilead* trilogy (*Gilead*, 2004, *Home*, 2008 and *Lila*, 2014) and it is one of the most popular and influential works in the new millennium of the United States. Professional critics and literary scholars, including the former American President Barack Obama have praised *Gilead*. In his interview with the author he says:

One of my favorite characters in fiction is a pastor in Gilead, Iowa, named John Ames, who is gracious and courtly and a little bit confused about how to reconcile his faith with all the various travails that his family goes through. And I was just – I just fell in love with the character, fell in love with the book. (Obama, 2015)

The President's interview focuses on the protected values in the novel. Faith, family and education are the values cherished in *Gilead*. John Ames's story is clearly expressed by the narrator. This paper will provide a deep vision at the central tenets of Ames's philosophy for a worthy life.

The numerous award winner, Marilynne Summers Robinson is an American novelist and essayist. "Pulitzer Prize for fiction" in 2005, "National Humanities Medal" in 2012; "Library of congress Prize for American Fiction" in 2016 has been received by her along with "Women's Prize for Fiction"; "PEN/ Hemingway Award" and many more. She was educated in the University of Washington and Brown University. Her notable works are *Housekeeping* (1980); *Gilead* (2004); *Home* (2008); and *Lila* (2014). This paper examines *Gilead* and the values to live at the concept of a healthy and cultural living. Transience of life is portrayed in *Gilead*. The protagonist and the

narrator, the Reverend John Ames, is an elderly congregational Pastor in the small town of Gilead. He is diagnosed with angina pectoris and awaits his death. Philosophical ideas spring out when an individual is aware of his death within a short period. The central issue of the novel is narrated in the first paragraph of the story:

I told you last night that I might be gone sometime, and you said, where,  
and I said, To be with the Good Lord, and you said, why, and I said,  
Because I'm old, and you said, I don't think you're old. And you put  
your hand in my hand and you said, You aren't very old, as if that settled  
it. (2004, 3)

Ames's words are addressed to his seven-year-old son in a mild language. He tells his son that he is to pass away. He decides to write a letter which eventually, "becomes a prayer of self-scrutiny, a time capsule of fatherly wisdom, a plainspoken treatise on the difficulty of virtue within the most sincere moral consciousness" (325). A father express everything that he intends to share with his son. His "letter" becomes a complex story of Ames's past that shaped him and his present, including the relationship that he is bounded with. The beginning lines of his 'letter' reflect his past more than his present. It includes his weaknesses, shortcomings and failures. The readers acknowledge Ames as a man of stark honesty and strong emotions. He is also a pious and disciplined person of immense personal integrity. The character, Ames is made so interesting at his willingness to talk intelligently of faith and sacraments. Ilana Ritor and Jonathan Baron define protective values as "those that people think should not be traded off" (79). They further point out that "[i]f these values are accepted, they trump all other values and dictate the decision" (79). Such values may be described as sacred and absolutely necessary. Robinson's *Gilead* identifies three major cherished values faith, family and education. These values are the main conflicts and their relevance is scrutinized in the events of life which Ames and other characters go through.

Kay Parris in the preface to the interview with Marilynne Robinson observes that "[a]n acclaimed novelist bringing serious theology into fiction is not a common phenomenon" (2010). Refraining one from cliché and didacticism and to write fiction of faith and spirituality is an uneasy task. The great ambition of the writers has been to delve into the variety of human

experience and to deliver the gained one with meaning and purpose and further seek “profound conclusion to otherwise unresolved circumstances” of one’s life and existence. The quest of fiction seem more complicated in the secular era of postmodern scepticism described by Robinson as “our modern condition, a state of malaise and anomie” (2011,1). According to Robinson, a great transformation took place within the last two centuries and “[w]e were told we had disabused ourselves of belief in God, and that the notion that human life had meaning has fallen within the collapse of religious belief” (1). In an equivalent way, John Paul II (9) in his *Letter to Artists* writes:

It is true nevertheless that, in the modern era, alongside this Christian humanism which has continued to produce important works of culture and art, another kind of humanism, marked by the absence of God and often by opposition to God, has gradually asserted itself. Such an atmosphere has sometimes led to a separation of the world of art and the world of faith, at least in the sense that many artists have a diminished interest in religious themes.

Paul Elie, who cannot be easily, convinced, in his essay called, *Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?* (2012), narrates faith, spirituality and particularly Christianity, as themes of current American literature. He writes that “if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-christian, it is literature” and raises a fundamental question: “Where has the novel of belief gone?” (2012). An argumentation on spirituality in fiction is an interesting context in American literature. George M. Marsden points out, “levels of religious practice came to be much higher in the United States than in other modernized nation” (9). According to Paul Elie, Robinson’s *Gilead* is a impressive spiritual literary work and Rev. John Ames is “[t]he most emphatically Christian character in contemporary American fiction” (2012), “Whose belief is believable because it is so plainly the fruit of a personal search” (2012). The literary historian and critic, D.G Myers considers Robinson “the most powerful and convincing advocate for religion’s place in the human experience” (Myers, 2012). For Roxana, the journalist, Robinson’s intentions seems to make human life and meaning intelligible each in terms of the other.

For the characters in her fiction, religious faith is a part of meaning, part of leading an examined life. Faith doesn’t eliminate human problems – fear and confusion, pain and loss-but it can alleviate them. And human existence is expanded by the idea of grace, by a sense of trust in God’s presence and gratitude for the mortal loveliness of the world. Grace

illuminates these books, and so does a sense of inquiry, of intellectual questing.  
(30)

Anthony Domestico debate on Robinson's work claiming that:

*Gilead* puts the lie to those critics who say that contemporary fiction doesn't engage seriously with religion. It shows that Christianity is both a lived practice and a system of belief, a deposit of artistic riches and an endless source of intellectual exploration. (15)

In *Gilead*, religious experience is intermingled with the Divine creation and infuses God's plan with a miraculous and mysterious nature. The deep faith in God guides Ames every day. His existence becomes a constant prayer and whenever he fails, he finds refuge in God. It is interesting to observe Ames understanding the mysteries of life. Faith is one of the crucial protected values in the novel. It provides Ames with moral principles and gives him enough rationalization and explanation for every thing that happen to him in his life. Faith guides his inner world and his conduct. It helps him to find satisfying answers to the questions which goes beyond human reason.

Family life and its relationships especially between fathers and sons are given a very important role in *Gilead* one of the most notable values. Ames shares with his son the love and respect for those who have passed away. He stresses on to a fact that their physical absence is irreversible but their presence is to be felt through memories and also through objects they once possessed. It is important to note that relationships are equally important and difficult. The family in *Gilead* is based on mutual respect along with serious quarrels quite often. There were conflicts between Ames's father and grandfather on the resistance against slavery and injustice. His grandfather claims that Jesus himself appeared to him in chains: "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" (175).

Ames's grandfather argues for fierce military action against slavery. But Ames is firm towards an idea that violence provokes further violence. The conflict between Ames and his grandfather pave way for more important philosophical questions. It is that, nobody can fight against oppression justify the use of violence and killing? Although Ames and his grandfather believe in a purpose life of Christianity but practically they differ. For Ames's grandfather, life for

Christ is to fight for injustice (slavery). He is neither concerned at his own pains nor for the loss of his own eye. He further explains:

All the regret he ever felt was for his unfortunates, with none left over, for himself, however he might be injured, until his friends began to die off, as they did one after another in the space of about two years. Then he was terribly lonely, no doubt about it. I think that was a big part of his running off to Kansas. That and the fire and the Negro church. (36)

Inter generationality becomes a determined turning point in Ames's life. He starts writing unaware of the abrupt change that awaits him. The arrival of his grandson, Jack Boughton and his own fear of losing his wife Lila makes him emotional. Life without Lila is an unbearable thought for Ames. The situation becomes worse when Jack and Lila do not speak and Ames couldn't suspect their betrayal. When Ames's confusion between faith and feelings appears more intense, he wishes for a peaceful death. *Gilead* is described as "a quite essentially American story" (27). It encapsulates "the American foundation myth" (27). This novel is firmly rooted in the values of family. Ames admits that life before Lila, he "didn't feel very much at home in the world" (4). At present he feels that he is strongly attached to the physicality of life and existence. Home is a place where one may return any time. Relationship with family safeguard for the well being of an individual. *Gilead* places a special importance on the fact that it is the chief responsibility of the family members to create strong relationships fixed firmly in sincerity, honesty and love.

Education permeates the novel. His reading habits and his selection of books are mentioned on several occasions. Classical Greek and Hebrew are read for preaching. Ames's deep knowledge of the Bible is learnt by heart (67). The habit of memorizing was motivated by his father from his childhood. He was paid a penny for every five verses by heart. He practiced the same for his young son, explaining its exclusive importance. Ames is clear of the values of the books. He believes that it is a source of education and edification. He hopes that his son has read some books, especially of John Donne (77). Ames's interest in history is mentioned in *Gilead*. He has strong belief in reading, "that the purpose of steeples was to attract lightning.(...) Then I read some history, and I realized after a while that not every church was on the ragged edge of the Great Plains, and not his reading of the civil war to better understand the conflict between his father and grand after (76). Ames's belief is that books are the revelatory of a person's thoughts and character. The passion of learning is obvious at his purchase of books frequently. Ames constant return to books

relates him to the past. It not only serves him but serves as a didactic and educational means for his son (2004, 39). Ames's intellectual pursuits owe much to the cultural traditions of Protestantism. Ames's Cong rational affiliation and Robinson's usage of the Bible are the themes, conflicts, and motifs as central to *Gilead*. The Biblical characters namely, Cain, Abraham, Isaac and the parable of the prodigal son are major influences that generate the logical discourses in the novel. The Biblical discourses relate Ames understands of life to great heights. His reference to poetry makes him calm at difficult and different situations. John Donne (1573 – 1631), Isaac Watts (1674 – 1748) and George Herbert (1593 – 1633) are close to Ames's heart. John Donne is Ames recommendation to Lila for reading. Poetry serves Ames as a creative plat form. It helps Ames towards the exchange of ideas in reality. He is not only a poetry reader. He confesses his partiality to writing verse (2004, 45). He underestimates his poetic skills. His love for language, the sounds, the words, his thinking in figurative language, evidences his imaginative narrative. Ames's education and learning establish the interrelation of the common and the sacred. This double nature of existence is the experience of the numinous, which is difficult to express in words. Though learning provides one with information and knowledge, reality transcends the boundaries of the verbal discourse.

Ames concludes his "letter": "I'll pray that you grow up a brave man in a brave country. I will pray you find a way to be useful. I 'll Pray, and then I'll sleep" (2004,247). The life Philosophy of Ames is not easy to practice, to lead a contemplative and active life; it requires nothing less to Ames's experience. The protagonist of the novel has an authoritative narrative throughout the novel. It picturized Ames life full of suffering, anguish, hope and joy, He proves the piety and the old Man's wisdom, His practice of R.Truss is mentioned in his article on S.T.Coleridge: "The particular must lead to the general. Love must begin with love of particulars parsons" (8) He concludes his philosophy of being a gift for others. The whole narrative is an expression of gratitude and the novel elucidates how the cultivation of Christian virtues contributes to a purposeful life. Being connected to other people in a meaning ful way resolves many tensions in life and generate satisfaction. The reflective, ethical way of living along with a space for good is bleed. Faith, family and education are the three cherished values in reality, based on Christian worship, relationship and learning. *Gilead* highlights faith that helps to see one's conditions in its true perspective. Ames's narrative is not a sweet recommendation of a devout Christian life.

Robinson's novels show the complexities and intricacies of one's existence. It promotes calmness and strength, based on non – judgmental honest and fair treatment of oneself and of others

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