ADVENT SERIES ON MARIYLYNNE ROBINSON' *GILEAD*

(1) THE DANGER OF BEING GOOD

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Race and Civil Rights Movement in the Novel[1]

1. Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* is set in 1956, that is during the Civil Rights Movement when racial issues are at their apex.
   - 1.1. John Ames starts writing his letter only two years after the *Brown v. Board of Education,* which was a United States Supreme Court decision that reversed the policy of segregation and ordered the integration of African-Americans into all public schools. John, however never mentions it.
   - 1.2. In addition, 1956 is a year that precedes the Montgomery Bus Boycott that inaugurated the Civil Rights Movement – also never mentioned.
   - 1.3. He also starts writing his letter a year after Emmett Till's tragic death,[2] again completely ignored in *Gilead* and referred to disparagingly in *Home*.
2. The history of Iowa suggests how significant issues of race should have been in John's life.
   - 2.1. Ever since its creation in 1846, the state of Iowa had prohibited slavery and declared itself a free state.
   - 2.2. Iowa was also heavily involved in the Civil Rights Movement, as seven years prior to John's letter, the Iowa Supreme Court in the case of State v. Katz ruled it illegal to refuse service on the basis of race.
3. John's obliviousness is all the more suspect in light in the light of the history of his family.
   - 3.1. the fictional hometown Gilead is modelled after the town of Tabor, Iowa, which was founded as a type of a garrison for militants fighting the spread of slavery.
   - 3.2. John's grandfather set up abolitionist camps and underground railroads prior to the Civil War in order to help African-Americans escape the plight of slavery.
   - 3.3. John even mentions that his grandfather "was an acquaintance of John Brown, and of Jim Lane," two of the most prominent abolitionists in the

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[1] Dr. Charlotte Jacobson, https://gradesfixer.com/free-essay-examples/treatment-of-race-an-analysis-of-racial-politics-in-marilynne-robinsons-gilead/

[2] Emmett Louis Till (July 25, 1941 – August 28, 1955) was a 14-year-old African American youth who was abducted and lynched in Mississippi in 1955 after being accused of offending a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, in her family's grocery store. The brutality of his murder and the acquittal of his killers drew attention to the long history of violent persecution of African Americans in the United States. Till posthumously became an icon of the civil rights movement.

nineteenth century (47). Along with John Brown and Jim Lane, his grandfather participated in a violent political quarrel known as Bleeding Kansas where he fought on the anti-slavery side.

3.4. Both John and his father criticized the grandfather's visions where Christ asked him to join the fight for abolitionism, which sparked a multi-generational conflict.

3.5. John's father moved away from the grandfather's ideology of attaining peace through violence.

4. Both pastors, John Ames and Robert Boughton, are subscribers of *Christian Century*:

> Most damning for Ames and Boughton, the *Century* was a remarkably loud, clear, and persistent voice of protest against racism. [In 1956, the year in which the novel is set], a major article on racism in the South was immediately followed by one pointedly titled, "Racism in Northern City Churches." As we are reminded in the Gilead trilogy, the Montgomery bus boycott was unfolding in real time, and the Century fully and unequivocally backed the African American activists, praising by name Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, and Rosa Parks.[3]

5. John's godson Jack Boughton has married a colored woman at a time when interracial marriage was criminalized by anti-miscegenation laws and comes back to Gilead 20 years after he left to see whether it might be possible for him and his family to move to Gilead

5.1. When Jack attempts to start a conversation about race, John chooses to neglect whatever Jack says.

5.2. Although John's own godson is directly affected by racial tensions and the mistreatment of African-Americans in the United States, John still decides to remain unconcerned with issues of race.

> Jack Boughton has a wife and a child. He showed me a picture of them. He only let me see it for half a minute, and then he took it back. I was slightly at a loss, which he must have expected, and still I could tell it was an effort for him not to take offense. You see, the wife is a colored woman. That did surprise me. (*Gilead*, 247)
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> "I came here [said Jack], thinking I might find some way to live with my family here, I mean my wife and son. I have even thought it might be a pleasure to introduce Robert to my father. I would like him to know that I finally have something I can be proud of. He's a beautiful child, very bright. And believe me, he's being brought up in the church. He wants to be a preacher. But now I see how feeble my father is, and I don't want to kill him. I really don't. I have enough on my shoulders as it is." (*Gilead*, 261f)
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> But then he said, "What about this town? If we came here and got married, could we live here? Would people leave us alone?" Well, I didn't know the answer to that one, either. I

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[3] Timothy Larsen, "The Theological World of the Reverend John Ames", in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson* (Wheaton Theology Conference Series), 23.

> thought so. He said, "There was a fire at the Negro church." "That was a little nuisance fire, and it happened many years ago." "And it has been many years since there was a Negro church." Of course there wasn't much I could say to that. He said, "You have influence here." I said that might be true, but I couldn't promise to live long enough to make much use of it. I mentioned my heart. (*Gilead*, 264)

6. At the end of the book, John refers to Langston Hughes's[4] poem "Harlem" about dreams and hopes drying away or exploding.

> What happens to a dream deferred?
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> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?*[5]

7. John Ames believes that "hope deferred is still hope," and relies on it as a factor that will bring the state of Iowa back to its original status of a "shining star".

> This whole town does look like whatever hope becomes after it begins to weary a little, then weary a little more. But hope deferred is still hope. I love this town. I think sometimes of going into the ground here as a last wild gesture of love—I too will smolder away the time until the great and general incandescence. (*Gilead*, 281)

8. As Langston Hughes's poem shows, however, a hope or a dream deferred does not lead to any resolution.

The preservation of social order[6]

9. Gilead operates in the vein of literary realism, fiction that captures white Christian indifference toward racial injustice of mid-twentieth century America. (100)

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[4] James Mercer Langston Hughes (February 1, 1901– May 22, 1967) was an American poet, social activist, novelist, playwright, and columnist from Joplin, Missouri. One of the earliest innovators of the literary art form called jazz poetry, Hughes is best known as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance.

[5] Langston Hughes, "Harlem" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes,* University of Missouri Press (BkMk Press), 2002. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem

[6] Patricia Andujo, "Marilynne Robinson and the African American Experience", in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson* (Wheaton Theology Conference Series), 100.

10. The erasure of race or the skirting of racial issues is telling of one of America's greatest sins—its inability to move beyond its whiteness to step over into the "otherness" of oppressed people groups. (100)

11. Whereas the "nonviolent" component of Martin Luther King's program was not controversial, the "direct action" agitated many Christians.
    - 11.1. In response to King's desegregation demonstrations in Alabama in 1963, a group of eight clergymen published a statement criticizing King's direct actions, arguing that the demonstrations were "unwise and untimely".
    - 11.2. They go on to argue that "such actions as incite to hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems."
    - 11.3. With such a statement, the clergymen refuse to acknowledge the inequity and oppression at the root of this racial tension.

12. In King's reply from the Birmingham jail, he reminds the clergymen of the origin of this lamentable tension:

    > "we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive."

    - 12.1. King understands that the undertone of the clergymen's statement is one of avoidance—a dismissal of responsibility in favor of social order. (103)

      > "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice."

13. Passive pacifism is a strategy used to avoid confrontation by hiding behind the mask of "nonviolence." This avoidance perverts King's message of nonviolence in service of white respectability. In principle, passive pacifism opposes injustice, but in practice, [it avoids] meaningful action. (108)

14. In *Gilead*, Reverend John Ames and his father represent two generations of passive pacifism that fails the black citizens of Gilead and the community as a whole. (108)

15. Present-day Gilead has moved a long way away from the radical social consciousness of the grandfather.
    - 15.1. Choosing the safety of indifference, John Ames allows himself to escape moral struggles regarding social justice.
    - 15.2. [...] His repeated dismissal of the black church's fire as a "small fire" and "little nuisance" highlights the fact that he refuses to fully engage the problematic reality of racial tension in Gilead. His disregard for the import of the incident punctuates his refusal to acknowledge the hatred that precipitated the fire. (110)

16. As the black citizens of Gilead leave town, there is no indication in Ames's narrative that

any efforts by the townspeople are made to prevent their departure. There is no urgency to work passionately for racial reconciliation.

16.1. With a clear conscience that he was not the perpetrator of the church fire, Ames construes his inaction as acceptable action.

16.2. Upon closure of the black church, an unnamed black pastor brings Ames some flowers dug up from the church; Ames casually accepts the flowers, as casually as he would welcome a warm plate of food.

16.3. He never truly contemplates or laments the black community's absence; he merely notes that he "didn't know the Negro pastor well." (*Gilead*, 42)

17. This is part of the problem. Gilead was a desegregated town, but not an integrated community.

17.1. King clarifies the distinction between desegregation and integration when he explains, "Desegregation breaks down the legal barriers and brings men together physically. . . . Integration is a personal and intergroup feeling."

17.2. Had true fellowship and communal bonding taken place between the races in Gilead, perhaps Ames would have had a relationship with the black congregation, and perhaps his reaction to the fire at their church would have been more impassioned.

17.3. Ultimately, it is easy for Ames and the citizens of Gilead to write their understanding of justice and sufficient action because they no longer have the presence of a black community to which they must be held accountable. (111f)

17.4. Instead, Gilead becomes a town in a trance, cf. the words of John's brother, Edward: "This is a backwater—you must be aware of that already. Leaving here is like waking from a trance." (30)

17.5. When Jack finally reveals to Ames, in *Gilead*, that part of his reason for returning to Gilead is to assess the racial climate of the town, Ames is unable to assure him that his family would be able to live there in peace.

17.6. The uncertainty of Gilead's racial harmony, or lack thereof, is a by-product of the town's Christian pacifist response to social injustice. Not only does Jack find his hometown void of an ethical center regarding race matters, but he also realizes that Gilead lacks the spiritual sustenance (119)

18. That the views of the 'white moderate' clergymen [opposing M. L. King] is shared by both John Ames and of his friend Robert Boughton appears more clearly in another novel of the *Gilead* series, *Home* – which tells the same story from the viewpoint of the Boughton family (the father, Gloria, and Jack). There are discussions between the pastor and his son Jack (who has married a black woman) on the issue of Civil Rights

18.1. Reverend Boughton's antipathy for nonviolent direct action is made evident in his response to the television news coverage of the Civil Rights demonstrations that turn violent against the protesters. Not only is he apathetic regarding the events in Alabama, but he is also relentlessly critical of the nonviolent demonstrators, seeing them as the source of unnecessary civil strife and disorder. (117)

> On the screen white police with riot sticks were pushing and dragging black demonstrators. There were dogs. His father said,

> "There's no reason to let that sort of trouble upset you. In six months nobody will remember one thing about it." Jack said, "Some people will probably remember it." "No. It wasn't so long ago that everybody was talking about Senator McCarthy. Watching those fellows argue. It's television that makes things seem important, whether they are or not. Now you never hear a word about Senator McCarthy." Jack said, "Well, that's important, isn't it?" "I can't disagree. I don't know. I never admired him." Police were pushing the black crowd back with dogs, turning fire hoses on them. Jack said, "Jesus Christ!" His father shifted in his chair. "That kind of language has never been acceptable in this house." Jack said, "I—" as if he had been about to say more. But he stopped himself. "Sorry." (*Home*, 97f)
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> On the screen an official was declaring his intention to enforce the letter of the law. Jack said something under his breath, then glanced at his father. The old man said, "I do believe it is necessary to enforce the law. The Apostle Paul says we should do everything 'decently and in order.' You can't have people running around the streets like that." (*Home*, 97f)
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> Jack must have taken his father to be in fact asleep, because when the news turned to the troubles in the South, he said, softly, "Jesus Christ." The old man roused himself. "What is it now?" "Oh, sorry," Jack said. "Sorry. It's Tuscaloosa. A colored woman wants to go to the University of Alabama." "It appears they don't want her there." Jack laughed. "It sure doesn't look like it." His father watched for a moment and then he said, "I have nothing against the colored people. I do think they're going to need to improve themselves, though, if they want to be accepted. I believe that is the only solution." [...]

18.2. [Robert Boughton] blames the demonstrators, arguing that "they bring it on themselves" when police officers respond violently to their peaceful protests. (117)

18.3. Boughton's callousness regarding the police brutality allows him to divert the attention to Jack's "blasphemous" use of the name of Jesus Christ; he is more disturbed by Jack's language than by the lack of humanity displayed on the television screen. (117)

18.4. As long as social order is restored and status quo is maintained, Boughton can overlook the degradation that black people are experiencing because he sees them as second-class citizens. The only way that black people can gain his respect and attention is if they "improve themselves . . . that is the only solution." (119)

19. The tragedy of innocent black children falling victim to racial strife is lost on Boughton once again when he flagrantly rewrites the history of young Emmett Till, who was brutally murdered by a mob of white men.

> "The colored people," his father said, "appear to me to be creating problems and obstacles for themselves with all this—commotion. There's no reason for all this trouble. They bring it on

> themselves." Jack looked at him. He drew a long breath, then another. He asked softly, "Have you heard of Emmett Till?" "Emmett Till. Wasn't he the Negro fellow that—attacked the white woman?" Jack said, "He was a kid. He was fourteen. Somebody said he whistled at a white woman." His father said, "I think there must have been more to it, Jack. As I remember, he was executed. There was a trial." Jack said, "There was no trial. He was murdered. He was a child, and they murdered him." He cleared his throat to recover control of his voice. "Yes, that is upsetting. I had another memory of it." Jack said, "We read different newspapers." "That might be the difference. Still, parents have a responsibility." "What?" "They bring children into a dangerous world, and they should do what they have to do to keep them safe." Jack cleared his throat. "But they can't always—they might really want to. It's very hard. It's complicated—" He laughed. (*Home, 155f*)

19.1. Boughton's recollection of Till's death is that Till received a trial, was found guilty, and consequently executed.

19.2. After Jack corrects him, Boughton remains unmoved by the tragedy, asserting that Till's parents are somehow to blame for Till's death because they failed to keep him safe.

19.3. Boughton never holds white supremacists accountable for their actions, nor does he expect them to make strides toward racial reconciliation. (119)

20. John Ames, his father, and Robert Boughton are accurate representations of some of America's white Christian leaders during the mid-twentieth century and currently.

20.1. They cower from meaningful direct action, they miss the opportunity to use their authority effectively, and they retreat into a world of vast oblivion.

20.2. As beloved as Ames, his father, and Boughton are in Gilead, they ultimately fall short of their spiritual responsibility to love, defend, and advocate for the marginalized among them. (120f)

Rowan Williams on the danger of wanting to be 'good'[7]

21. We like to define ourselves as good very often because we like to make sure where our boundaries are; we like to be confident that who we are and what we are is generated by good motivation, or by divine agency, or by good education and upbringing, or by generosity of temperament or by mixtures of various of these together. But this can blind us to the ways in which we are shaped by what we don't know. (158)

22. Gilead is a town that has forgotten a great deal of its history, forgotten its radical and risk-taking edge; and so it has become "good." It's become good in a way which is in fact toxic to those who don't happen to belong. (158)

23. We have to move [...] from a focus on goodness to a focus on solidarity, to what it means for us to be bound to one another and shaped by one another to the extent that none of us

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[7] Rowan Williams, "Beyond Goodness. Gilead and the Discovery of the Connections of Grace" in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson* (Wheaton Theology Conference Series).

can be brought back into full healing relation with God without being brought back to one another. (160)

24. Our fundamental Christian texts tell us that the nature of the Christian community is "implication."
    - 24.1. The loss and pain of one is the loss and pain of all, the joy of one is the joy of all.
    - 24.2. And as Saint Paul repeatedly insists, especially in his Corinthian letters, that means that none of us can imagine our own healing and reconciliation purely as atoms, as mutually isolated individuals.
    - 24.3. Paul is no more of a glib universalist than anyone else, but he does leave us with a challenge. How might we imagine a healing that we can only achieve together? To begin to imagine it, we have to begin to purge our own imaginations of some of the fantasies of a "goodness" that can be ours in the absence of our neighbor; to move from goodness towards solidarity. (161)

25. John Ames overcomes a particular kind of frozen or damaged or deficient goodness [only] when he discovers an unexpected solidarity with Jack. He allows himself to recognize that they belong together, discovers an unexpected solidarity with Jack. He allows himself to recognize that they belong together, not apart. (162).

Conclusion: some quotations from an essay by Marilynne Robinson[8]

26. We know that entropy is a universal principle of existence. All things change, groups disband, traditions dissolve, some becoming the opposite of themselves. (171)

27. It must be acknowledged, first of all, that religion is volatile, liable to catastrophic excesses. This is true of the isolated zealot, whose conscience drives him to violence, and also and more dangerously true of the quiet communicant in a church apparently anchored in history and doctrine, who suspends moral judgment out of trust and deference, and countenances enormities. (172f)

28. One of my old Puritans said, "In winter, life hides in the root." (176)

29. I would suggest that the grace of God has among its beautiful means our ability to offer grace to one another. (178)

[8] Marilynne Robinson, "The Protestant Conscience", in Timothy Larsen (ed.), *Balm in Gilead: A Theological Dialogue with Marilynne Robinson* (Wheaton Theology Conference Series).