

# Literature and Learning in Marilynne Robinson's Novel *Gilead*

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*Literature and learning play an important role in Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel Gilead (2004). By focusing on the author's many references to books, literature and learning, the present paper attempts to study their individual contextual occurrences and explores how they saturate the discursive substratum of the novel's major themes. The paper claims that a special role attributed to books and learning, and particularly to the Greek New Testament, The Trail of the Lonesome Pine and The Essence of Christianity, sheds significant light on the philosophical and spiritual aspects of the meaning of life, one of the novel's central concerns.*

## Keywords

Literature; learning; narrative; meaning of life; wisdom

"How many a man has dated a new era in his life  
from the reading of a book."

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

## 1. Introduction

Marilynne Robinson's trilogy *Gilead* (2004), *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014) has become, without doubt, one of the most popular and influential works published in the United States in the new millennium. The first volume won the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Critics Circle Award. *Home* received the 2009 Orange Prize for Fiction and became a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award in Fiction, while *Lila*, the third instalment, won the National Book Critics Circle Award. The list of awards evidences the far-reaching and culturally significant appeal of Robinson's trilogy which can be rightly considered as one of the key works of contemporary American

literature, the focus of which is on the themes of faith and spirituality. *Gilead* has been praised by professional critics and literary scholars (see Anderson 2005; Domestico 2014; Evans 2014)<sup>1</sup> and lay readers, including a former American President, Barack Obama (see Kakutani 2009).<sup>2</sup> According to Amy Hungerford, “What Robinson’s novels imagine [...] is both discourse and practice: thematically and narratively, they give us the mental discourse of religious persons while also spinning stories that situate those persons within religious life” (114). Anthony Domestico also puts an emphasis on the religious appeal of the text: “*Gilead* makes a fundamentally good man seem interesting, and part of what makes Ames so interesting is his willingness to talk intelligently about matters of faith – in particular, his willingness to talk about the sacraments” (15).

The Reverend John Ames in Marilynne Robinson’s *Gilead* is an elderly Congregational pastor who lives in a small town, Gilead, Iowa. Ames’s life has not been easy. After he unexpectedly lost his wife Louisa and a new-born daughter, Ames spent long years in solitude, finding solace in God, carrying out his pastoral duties in Gilead’s small community, and learning. He is well into his sixties when he meets Lila, the love of his life, his wife and mother to his only son.

At the beginning of the novel we learn that Ames has been diagnosed with angina pectoris and knows that he is dying. He, therefore, decides to write a letter to his seven-year-old child, the text which “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” (Painter 325). It is interesting to observe how Ames’s narrative subtly changes and develops. The first pages reflect his past more than his present, then he gradually intuits that what he *really* needs to pass down is his authentic picture, with weaknesses, shortcomings and failures. It is difficult to estimate at which point his “begats” (Robinson 9) turn into a “diary” (Robinson 185). Ames’s deliberate ambition to write down everything he considers important changes in a subtle and very important way. He begins with a strong entry-point, focusing on the critical retrospect of the past, yet, as the story progresses, Ames shifts much of his attention to the present. I believe that this shift, however, does not prove Ames to be selective and evasive as he slowly moves away from his original intention. On the contrary, his detailed record of the present is the evidence of his sincerity and humility.

Ames’s voice is convincing and humble, it is “a defense of subjectivity” (Evans 143). He is a pious and disciplined person of immense integrity and

his story is characterized by stark honesty. D. W. Schmidt thinks that, “[i]n the context of American literary history, Ames’s expression of his father-love may be the most eloquent and sincere statement we have from an American fictional father” (123). Ames’s philosophy of life lacks the hopelessness one might expect of a man who is facing death. Ames loves God, loves the world, his family and friends, all beautiful workings of the universe and for him existence is the miracle, it “is the essential thing and the holy thing” (Robinson 189). According to Laura E. Tanner, “[a] stunning meditation on the power and limits of consciousness in the face of mortality, *Gilead* explores the lived experience of history, religious faith, and human connection through the perspective of a singular character inhabiting the tenuous boundary between life and death” (805).

While *Gilead* addresses many philosophical questions worthy of detailed scrutiny, the present paper focuses on Robinson’s use of literature and learning, which, I argue, sheds significant light on the philosophical and spiritual aspects of the meaning of life, one of the novel’s central concerns. By studying the author’s many references to books, literature and learning, the paper shows how these saturate the discursive substratum of the novel’s themes and help to solve the existential riddle of the essence of the life worth living.

The paper is divided into two main parts. The first one discusses the values of literature and learning and proves their fundamental significance in the novel. The second part studies three books mentioned in *Gilead* and their functions in the narrative. These are the Greek Testament, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and *The Essence of Christianity*. The central argument of the paper is that these books serve as essential clues in the quest for the meaning of life as suggested by Ames’s spiritual outlook on human existence.

## **2. Books and Learning in *Gilead***

According to Matthew Reisz, “[b]ooks have often cut through religious dogmas, sexual attitudes or received political wisdom and enabled people to remake their lives by embracing other behaviours and beliefs. There are cases of a single book curing depression, inspiring a lifetime’s work – or even causing reader to fall in love with writer” (129). A detailed look at literature and learning in *Gilead* proves Reisz’s view.

Ames’s love of books and learning permeates the novel. There are miscellaneous works such as a health care book owned by his mother, “large

and expensive, and it was a good deal more particular than Leviticus” (Robinson 17); the gift Ames received a long time ago, of “one of those books with humorous little sermon anecdotes in it somewhere” (Robinson 144); or “a certain book the preacher had which illustrated the customs of the Orient” (Robinson 62). The latter was found so inspiring that the Abolitionist villagers used it to convince prospective visitors that the collapsed land above the tunnel was in fact caused by constructions of terraces modelled on the Oriental practices depicted in the book.

Ames’s reading habits, as well as the choice of books he is familiar with, are mentioned on several occasions. He often reads through the night, the practice followed by a walk and a visit to church (Robinson 70). He reads the Classical languages of Greek and Hebrew, and with his best friend Boughton (they “used to go through the texts we were going to preach on, word by word” (Robinson 65)), practices Biblical exegesis.

Ames has deep knowledge of the Bible, much of it learnt by heart (Robinson 67). The exercise of memorizing goes back to Ames’s childhood, when motivated by his father, he was paid a penny for every five verses learnt by heart with no mistake. Ames values such kind of oral knowledge very much, and his young son is also encouraged in this practice: “You know the Lord’s Prayer and the Twenty-third Psalm and Psalm 100. And I heard your mother teaching you the Beatitudes last night” (Robinson 67). These eight blessings appear later in the book in the form of an unconventional gift for Ames’s 77<sup>th</sup> birthday from his little son who “recited the Beatitudes with hardly a hitch, two times over, absolutely shining with the magnitude of the accomplishment” (Robinson 185). Both parents thus facilitate their son’s memorization of Biblical passages, hereby suggesting the exclusive importance of having such texts in one’s heart.

When addressing his son, Ames is very clear about the values provided by books as a source of education and edification. He hopes that his son will read some of his books (Robinson 210) – he particularly mentions the English poets John Donne (Robinson 77) and George Herbert (Robinson 111) – and frequent references to the Bible expect the son’s adequate command of this collection of texts (e.g., the Book of Isaiah) (Robinson 137). Ames understands the capacity of the Biblical verse to enlighten experience, and provide a new perspective.

Ames is a living library, well-read in poetry as well as in a great variety of prose. We learn that he owns “mostly theology, and some old travel books from before the wars” (Robinson 77). In a passage where he writes about the

tension caused by his father's uncertainty about Ames's faith, he provides the names of many controversial and radical thinkers he is familiar with, such as the Welsh social reformer and one of the founders of utopian socialism Robert Owen (1771-1858), the American philosopher and psychologist William James (1842-1910), the English novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), the Swedish scientist, philosopher and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) and the Russian occultist and co-founder of the Theosophical Society, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) (Robinson 235).

Ames's interest in history is specifically mentioned, too. Reading improves knowledge as is the case of his belief "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 every pulpit had my father in it" (Robinson 114). He also discusses his reading on the Civil War to better understand the conflict between his pacifist father and military grandfather (Robinson 76).

The room where he learns, reads and writes is Ames's most precious space and its intimacy measures only the letter/journal he is writing for his son. In his understanding, the books one owns and reads are revelatory of the person's thoughts and character. Ames is, therefore, quite sensitive when Lila asks Jack to help move his study: "Well, of course he must know a good deal about my heart, since your mother did enlist him in bringing my study downstairs" (Robinson 213).

Ames's life-long passion for learning is obvious from frequent references to purchases of books, although his attitude to them, or better to say, to the money spent on them, alters after the radical change in his life. He ponders his former spending and the financial situation of his now impoverished family:

I do regret that I have almost nothing to leave you and your mother. A few old books no one else would want. I never made any money to speak of, and I never paid any attention to the money I had. It was the furthest thing from my mind that I'd be leaving a wife and a child, believe me. I'd have been a father if I'd known. I'd have set something for you. (Robinson 4)

These thoughts, however, do not prove his negative bias towards books and learning. They are, in fact, rather the understandable worries of a father caring about his family's financial security. The regrets over the money spent on literature are supplanted by Ames's appreciation of books as intimate friends

and a major joy and consolation in a period of sadness and loneliness, described as “[m]y own dark time” (Robinson 44) and “deep darkness (Robinson 55).

It is telling that Ames constantly returns to books in relation to the past, yet his portrayal of himself as an avid reader does not only provide a complex and detailed reader’s experience, but it simultaneously also serves as a didactic and educational means for his son (Robinson 39). There is good reason to suppose that Ames’s intellectual pursuits owe much to the cultural traditions of Protestantism, with its emphasis on books and learning, as well as its highest regard for the Scripture, read both in Classical and vernacular languages. According to Marilynne Robinson’s *The Givenness of Things*, “[t]he history of the Reformation is very largely a history of books and publication” (18). The importance of the Bible and books for the Reformed religions cannot be underplayed. In the words of Northrop Frye,

By ‘Reformation’ the Protestants meant, not simply the reforming of abuses within the Church, to which no one objected in principle, but the setting up of the Bible as a model of belief and action to which the Church would be required to conform. Thus the Church’s role was to enter into a dialogue with the Word of God and not to replace it as the source of revelation. (85)

In this regard, Ames’s Congregational affiliation and Robinson’s frequent use of the Bible – both as a source of themes, conflicts and motifs and mentions of a book *per se* – are central to *Gilead*. The characters of Cain, Abraham, Isaac and the parable of the Prodigal Son are major fertilizing influences which generate several theological discourses of the novel. The Bible’s special meaning relates to Ames’s understanding of it as a life sustaining and spiritually most relevant (and rewarding) discourse. As a material object it is an important bridge connecting the past with the present:

Whenever I have held a Bible in my hands, I have remembered the day they buried those ruined Bibles under the tree in the rain, and it is somehow sanctified by that memory. And I think of the old reverend himself preaching in the ruins of his church, with all the windows open so the few that were there could hear ‘The Old Rugged Cross’ drifting up the hill from the Methodist meeting. (Robinson 96)

The burial of the sacred books occurred in Ames’s childhood when his “father

helped to pull down a church that had burned" (Robinson 94) and the details of the event remained deeply engraved in Ames's memory. Here, the Bible conveys the sense of continuity, suggestive of a strong emotional appeal of the experience, a tragedy turned into a revelation.

In his narrative Ames makes several references to poetry. A special role is attributed to hymns, the singing of which brings tranquility in difficult situations. According to Frye, "[i]n a hymn sung by a group, such a phrase as 'I will praise the Lord' expresses the unity of that group by the metaphor of the individual, who in this case is identified with the author of the hymn" (90). Thus, the singing of "Blessed Jesus" and "The Old Rugged Cross" (Robinson 94) unites the whole community during the fire and consequent book burial and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" offers peace to the dying Lacey Thrush (Robinson 57). Hymns are so firmly rooted in Ames's mind that he sings them without actual realization of the meaning of the words. Once, when he is looking after his son, instead of some cheerful tone, he sings to him "Go to Dark Gethsemane", a popular Lenten hymn about the last twelve hours of the life of Jesus, written by the Scottish-born poet and hymnodist James Montgomery (1771-1854).

Ames names three particular authors of devotional poetry close to his heart. These are John Donne (1573-1631), Isaac Watts (1674-1748) and George Herbert (1593-1633). For example, John Donne is his recommended reading for Lila when she asks her husband what she should read (Robinson 77). Ames is an active reader of poetry who finds the verses existentially relevant. Those which he mentions in his diary function as a discourse of truth and balance his inner worries with hope.

Concerning the verses of the English Puritan Isaac Watts, Ames meditates:

"Time, like an ever-rolling stream,  
Bears all its sons away;  
They fly forgotten, as a dream  
Dies at the opening day.'

Good old Isaac Watts. I've thought about that verse often. I have always wondered what relationship this present reality bears to an ultimate reality.

'A thousand ages in Thy sight  
Are like an evening gone...'

No doubt that is true. Our dream of life will end as dreams do end, abruptly

and completely, when the sun rises, when the light comes. And we will think. All that fear and all that grief were about nothing. But that cannot be true. I can't believe we will forget our sorrows altogether. That would mean forgetting that we had lived, humanly speaking. Sorrow seems to me to be a great part of the substance of human life". (Robinson 103-104)

It is true that Ames often ponders these verses. They are mentioned again on page 191 and express the acceptance of the temporality of one's mortal existence. These very verses are also used in his grandfather's sermon (Robinson 176), which suggests Ames's grandfather might have had a special liking for Watts as well.

While Watts's verses refer to the nature of time and interconnectedness between the earthly existence and eternal life, George Herbert's text erases time altogether:

"'For Preservation is a Creation, and more, it is a continued Creation, and a Creation every moment.' That is George Herbert, whom I hope you have read. *Again*, all any heart has ever said, and just as the word is said the moment is gone, so there is not even any sort of promise in it.

'Wherefore each part

Of my hard heart

Meets in this frame,

To praise thy Name.

That, if I chance to hold my peace,

These stones to praise thee may not cease.'

Yet awhile.

Well, if Herbert is right, this old body is as new a creation as you are yourself". (Robinson 111)

The first sentence comes from Herbert's prosaic work *A Priest to the Temple*, known as *The Country Parson*. First published posthumously in 1652, the treatise advises rural pastors on many practical concerns and suggests a model for a caring pastor whose life goal is to imitate Jesus: "The Duty, in that a Priest is to do that which Christ did, and after his manner, both for Doctrine and Life". Herbert's sentence in *Gilead* problematizes the paradoxical nature of a believer's attitude to reality, aptly expressed by Northrop Frye: "The real world is beyond time, but can be reached only by a process that goes on in time" (76). God measures time differently than we do and our limited



understanding of reality hinders our acceptance of the idea of continuous creation.

The second part of Ames's quote is from Herbert's famous poem "The Temple", a deep meditation in which a human heart becomes an altar, the sacred space of sacrifice and sanctification. By adding that the nativity crib of Jesus has often been portrayed as an altar in the tradition of Christian visual art and by suggesting a close affinity between the altar, the crib and the tombstone, the metaphor brings forth additional interpretative layers. Seeing the three images as metaphors for the human heart, the heart becomes the ground where time is of no relevance, yet, simultaneously, it is the place of ultimate importance for human salvation.

Revealingly, the quotations of all three poets in *Gilead* deal with death and transformation. Through this special selection of verses Ames shares much spiritual intimacy with his son. Using the exact words of the poems, he offers his reader a chance to connect with him in a special imaginative way. Poetry serves here as a creative platform upon which the exchange of ideas takes place. These include the celebration of the continuity of human life as well as the power of humanity to find strength in God's grace and love.

Ames is not only a reader of poetry, but he also confesses his partiality to writing verse:

That mention of the sound of a seashell reminds me of a couple of lines of a poem I wrote once:

Open the scroll of conch and find the text

That lies behind the priestly susurrus.

There wasn't anything else worth remembering. One of Brighton's boys travelled to the Mediterranean for some reason, and he sent back that big shell I have always kept on my desk. I have loved the word 'susurrus' for a long time, and I had never found another use for it. Besides, what else did I know in those days but texts and priestliness and static? And what else did I love? (Robinson 45)

While Ames underestimates his poetic skills, his mention of writing offers an insight into his love for the language, sounds and meanings of words, as well as for thinking in metaphors and figurative language, vividly documented in his imaginative narrative.

Similarly to Bruce Gordon's John Calvin who "lived simultaneously in the world and before the face of God" (2), Ames's ontology establishes the

essential interrelatedness of the common and the sacred. This double nature of existence, which contains the experience of the numinous, is difficult to verbalize. Ames too discovers the limits of language to be able to share the sense of certain experiences effectively. There are moments when books and learning fail to provide satisfactory comments and responses, as in the case of Lila's baptism when Ames admits that "no matter how much I thought and read and prayed, I felt outside the mystery of it" (Robinson 21). Reading may provide one with information and knowledge, yet the experience may obviously transcend the boundaries of verbal discourse.

### **3. Books as the Focal Points of the Novel**

In *Gilead*, there are three particular books with the function of focal points in which the lives of characters meet. These are the Greek Testament, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* and *The Essence of Christianity*. The role of each is decisive in understanding the substance of the major conflicts in the novel.

#### **3.1 The Greek New Testament**

Ames's grandfather is an unforgettable character: a pastor, a soldier and a visionary who converses with Jesus and believes in the radical fight against oppression and injustice. Although depicted as a mystic and a man of awkward habits who is ready to steal in order to help those in need, Ames convinces his son that his great-grandfather was a learned man and belonged to the generation that "had been to Lane and Oberlin, and they knew their Hebrew and their Greek and their Locke and their Milton" (Robinson 50). Born in Maine and moving to Kansas in the 1830s to "make himself useful to the cause of abolition" (Robinson 49), his grandfather stays with the family until he returns to Kansas and becomes an itinerant preacher.

The Greek New Testament appears for the first time in *Gilead* as "a beat-up old Bible" (Robinson 10) sent to Ames's father with a watch and some letters as his grandfather's only surviving property. The letters were inquiries of Ames's father to learn the whereabouts of the old man who left rather unexpectedly after a bitter quarrel caused by the conflicting views of Ames's father and grandfather on the ways of resistance against slavery and social injustice. His grandfather claimed that Jesus himself appeared to him in chains and

gave him instructions which he could not oppose: "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" (Robinson 175). Being empowered by Christ's authority, his grandfather insisted on fierce military protest against slavery, while his pacifist son whose favourite verse of Scripture is Isaiah 9:5 thought that violence simply provokes further violence and ceases to be a legitimate force. The argument escalated in angry words pronounced by Ames's father, a bitter farewell to the grandfather who departed soon after. The grandfather does actually leave a few words which by its form and style remind one of a short poem and which Ames still keeps safe in his Bible:

"No good has come, no evil is ended.  
That is your peace.  
Without vision the people perish.  
The Lord bless you and keep you" (Robinson 85).

His grandfather's Greek New Testament is a book with a special history. When the Civil War broke out and he could not enlist in the Union army due to his age, the Testament helped him to enlist as a chaplain: "He hadn't brought along any sort of credentials, [...] he just showed them his Greek New Testament and that was good enough. I still have that somewhere, what remains of it. It fell into a river, as I was told, and never got dried properly till it was fairly ruined" (Robinson 75). Helping him to join the cause of existential relevance, the Testament is the book of fundamental importance for Ames's grandfather's life, his spirituality and convictions. On the other hand, Ames's special attitude to the Testament can be seen in his wish that his son might still have the book: "I hope you have it. It's the sort of thing that might appear to have no value at all" (Robinson 91).

The book plays its role also in the conflict with Jack who as a child stole it from Ames in his series of pranks: "Once, he took that old Greek Testament right off my desk. If ever there was a thing on earth so little worth the trouble of stealing I don't know what it would be. Once, he stole my reading glasses" (Robinson 182-183). The Testament and reading glasses are not the only items which Jack steals from "the father of his soul" (Robinson 123), as Ames calls himself in *Gilead*. Similarly to other things, the book appears again all of a sudden, "left on the doormat" (Robinson 182). In this context, it is possible

to conjecture that Jack knew very well what the Testament meant for Ames and the act of stealing was no more an act of a vicious child or a wilful declaration of independence than of a lonely boy's desire for his godfather's attention.

## **2.2 The Trail of the Lonesome Pine**

The second focal point of *Gilead* is a novel which relates to Ames's present. It is *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the bestselling romance written by the American writer John Fox, Jr. (1862-1919) in 1908. Ames's wife Lila discovers a copy in the public library, "worn ragged, all held together with tape" (Robinson 77), which indicates much use and the popularity of the book with the Gilead community. Although we never learn whether Lila knew something of the plot before having read it, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* becomes a very significant book not only for her, but for her husband as well. Her intense reading experience and the fact that she cannot easily part with the book triggers Ames's own interest in the story: "She just sank into it, though, she just melted into it. And I made scrambled eggs and toasted cheese sandwiches for our supper so she wouldn't have to put the book down. I read it years ago when everyone else did. I don't remember enjoying it particularly" (Robinson 77-78).

Similarly to Lila, the text does not inform whether Ames remembers something of its plot, though it seems unlikely assuming from the freshness of emotions he has while re-reading it:

I've started *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. I went over to the library and got a copy for myself, since your mother can't part with hers. I believe she's reading through it again. I'd forgotten it entirely, if I ever read it at all. There's a young girl who falls in love with an older man. She tells him, "I'll go with ye anywhar". That made me laugh. I guess it's a pretty good book. He isn't old like I am, but then your mother isn't young like the girl in the book, either. (Robinson 118)

The book appears just at the right time, when Ames becomes jealous of Jack Boughton. Returning to Gilead unexpectedly after twenty years, Ames suddenly feels unsure and unsafe when he faces the physical vigour of his best friend's son, especially so when he sees him together with Lila and his son. It is very painful for Ames to admit that "It's pretty to watch you, the three of you" (Robinson 165). Jack obviously looks much more appropriate a husband to Lila than Ames. There are a few important scenes in the novel which show Ames closely observing Jack playing with the boy and his conversations with

Lila. Although Ames's son is very enthusiastic about Jack, Lila is much more reserved which, however, does not unburden Ames who cannot avoid suspicion and jealousy: "They do talk, I know that. Not much and not often. But I sense a kind of understanding between them" (Robinson 180).

Although Ames's suspicions are unfounded, it is clear that he suffers from the possible (if not actual) loss of a beloved woman. Lila is highly unconventional and somewhat wild when she meets Ames, and she is a very unlikely partner for an aging pastor. Yet, their chance encounter at the Pentecost Sunday mass is a transformative event for both. Strange as the couple might seem to the Gilead community, Ames's love (we learn about the relationship from his perspective) seems genuine. There is a special touch of respect when he never calls his wife "Lila" and always refers to her as "your mother". Lila admires her husband's intellectual scope and Ames adds, "[y]our mother is respectful of my hours up here in the study. She's proud of my books" (Robinson 19). Lila must certainly feel uneducated in the company of Ames and Boughton, both well-versed in Scripture and theology. Ames never questions her personal qualities and writes about her: "An excellent woman, but unschooled in Scripture, and in just about everything else, according to her, and that may be true. I say this with all respect" (Robinson 67). Lila's deficiency in abstract theological thought is counterbalanced by her frankness and honesty. It is "her" response which Jack finds satisfactory in the debate on the possibility of man's transformation.

Lila soon begins to learn and study, for her son's benefit as well as for her own interests, enjoying in particular *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the novel about a young woman who prefers to love an old man instead of a younger one. Ames often ponders the question of aging and the deficiencies of an older body. Actually, his conception of Heaven or Paradise is centred on the imagery of physical strength and vitality (Robinson 166). He can never rival Jack in this regard, the realization of which falls heavily on his mind. Several scenes in the book demonstrate Ames's helplessness and his disappointments over the failings of his body. In a telling scene Ames who is about to meet Jack takes special care of his looks, wishing to be a decent match for his younger "rival". Some fights can never succeed, and all Ames's efforts fail as he falls asleep. Consolation and a desired sense of certainty come, surprisingly, in the form of the mentioned romantic novel. Ames explains: "I read most of it yesterday evening, and then I couldn't sleep, wondering about it, so I crept off to my study and read till almost dawn" (Robinson 132). It is interesting how a common text of no particular artistic or philosophical

value transforms into a personally relevant, even revelatory narrative. While the relationship of Ames and Lila is rich in honesty and love, there is less direct verbal intercourse of emotions between them. Therefore, their shared reading of the novel demonstrates feelings which might remain otherwise unsaid. Ames acknowledges: "It strikes me that your mother could not have said a more heartening word to me by any other means than she did by loving that unremarkable book so much that I noticed and read it, too. That was providence telling me what she could not have told me" (Robinson 133).

Ames intuitively sees the analogy between his life and the storyline of the novel. On the grounds of Lila's apparent enjoying of it, he cherishes the fact she might have found herself in the book. Both Lila and June, the novel's heroine, undergo a complex process of education stimulated by men; they share a love for flowers, and gardens play an important role in their stories. In both cases, the first impulse of love comes from the woman, but as the stories progress, Lila and June learn that first impressions and desires may become complicated and the worries and turbulences of life easily sow doubts and confusion in one's initial expectations and emotionally-based decisions.

Lila's experience with the book convinces Ames that while he cannot alter his aging, the happiness and security which Lila has with him are fulfilling and satisfying for her. Ames's interpretation of the novel is, however, somewhat precarious, since the novel's protagonist John (Jack) Hale has more in common with Jack Boughton than with Ames. It is true that Hale is much older than June – which suggests a parallel with Ames, yet he is a stranger and a lonely man, struggling to find his place in life and love. In this sense, he is closer to Boughton's tumultuous and adventurous nature than to Ames's deeply constituted religious character. Lila's enjoyment of the book can thus be far more disconcerting than Ames admits. She never says it openly, but her reading may in fact represent a fanciful and dreamy experience of imagining what life would be like if Jack Boughton stepped into her life as a lover. The reader's lack of knowledge of what Lila really thinks about the book adds an interesting flavour of ambiguity to *Gilead's* narrative. I believe that Ames's reading cannot be described as self-deceptive, although his interpretation suggests a certain bias in understanding the text. Knowing how sensitive and perceptive a reader Ames is, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* remains a crux to be solved.

I argue that *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* plays a major role in Ames's understanding of his relationship with Lila – independently of the fact whether John Hale's character is closer to Ames or to Boughton, and the novel is an

important step to Ames's realization of what true love means and represents: "I cannot really make myself believe that her feelings could have been at all like mine. And why do I worry so much over this Jack Boughton? Love is holy because it is like grace – the worthiness of its object is never really what matters. I might well be leaving her to a greater happiness than I have given her, even granting every difficulty" (Robinson 209). Similarly to the act of faith, love is an act of devotion and sacrifice, fully embedded in understanding that its ultimate expression is an ability to accept another person's happiness although it may contrast with one's own.

### 2.3 Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity*

Published in 1841, Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* is a complex critique of religion. A gift from his brother Edward, "thinking to shock me out of my uncritical piety" (Robinson 24), does not disturb Ames's faith in the slightest. Feuerbach's magnum opus actually becomes Ames's book of Christian apologetics and it is one of the books which Ames intends to leave for his son:

I'm going to set aside that Feuerbach with the books I will ask your mother to be sure to save for you. I hope you will read it sometime. There is nothing alarming in it, to my mind. I read it the first time under the covers, and down by the creek, because my mother had forbidden me to have any further contact with Edward, and I knew that would include my reading an atheistical book he had given me. [...] There are some notes of mine in the margins of the book which I hope you may find useful. (Robinson 27)

It is important to note that Robinson does not shy away from the issue of atheism or unbelief and the issues become to a great extent a major theme in the novel. According to Amy Hungeford, "John Ames is a character fully imagined to be living within Charles Taylor's secular age: he emerges in Gilead as a believer profoundly aware of the possibility – even the plausibility – of unbelief" (114). As Ames's narrative is coming to an end, it becomes evident that not his son but in fact Jack Boughton should receive the copy of Feuerbach's book. Ames arrives at this conclusion after much hesitation and uncertainty about how to relate to his difficult godson Jack. He confesses that he has "never been able to warm to him, never" (Robinson 188) and their relation is troubled by Ames's uncanny feelings about its very beginnings: "I have

thought from time to time that the child felt how coldly I went about his christening, how far my thoughts were from blessing him” (Robinson 188). It appears that Jack has never been blessed by Ames and their reconciliation is one of the most emotionally intense moments in the story.

Jack’s main concern is his struggle with faith. He feels hopeless about being unable to believe and sarcastically recounts a story of a man suddenly struck by spiritual transformation. Everything would be different, Jack thinks, if he could believe. In this sense, Jack’s character partner in *Gilead* is Ames’s brother Edward who, as a young man with great expectations to become a learned pastor, leaves for Germany. He becomes an atheist there, to the unlimited despair of his father who could never really understand what happened to his beloved son. Edward published a small book on Feuerbach and he used to provoke Ames’s religious convictions. According to Ames, strength of faith does not depend on provoking comments, or “dangerous” books:

But the fact is that his mind came from one set of books as surely as mine has come from another set of books. But that can’t be true. While I was at seminary I read every book he had ever mentioned and every book I thought he might have read, if I could put my hand on it and it wasn’t in German. If I had the money, I ordered books through the mail that I thought he might be about to read. When I brought them home my father began to read them, too, which surprised me at the time. Who knows where any mind comes from. It’s all mystery. (Robinson 125)

The expression “God’s mercy” might be used instead of “mystery” and it is typical of Ames that he never scoffs at those who struggle with faith. The worth of a man’s life is measured by deeds and action, and his narrative implies that while faith is a helpful guiding principle, it is not something to be forced upon another person.

By the strange workings of life, Jack’s atheistic mind contrasts with his looks. His bearing is often mistaken for that of a pastor which happens to be also a sparking moment of his encounter with Della, his present partner. Their relationship revolves around books and reading. They meet as “[s]he was walking home in a rainstorm with an armful of books and papers – she was a teacher – and some of the papers fell onto the pavement” (Robinson 221). In order to see each other again, Jack makes up a story: “I don’t know just how it happened – I stopped by to lend her a book I had bought in order to lend it to her – as if from my library – I even dog-eared a few pages – and



she invited me to come for Thanksgiving dinner" (Robinson 222-223). Finally, when they realize they feel close to one another, Jack says, "I'd come in the evenings with a book of poetry and we'd read to each other" (Robinson 223). As romantic as it seems, Jack's relationship with a black woman is troubled and he fails in many areas. "[M]arried in the eyes of God" only (Robinson 219), their family fights to survive. Much bitterness is in Jack as he faces fierce racism and his return to Gilead is a serious attempt to find a safe place for his family. The relationship is further complicated by Jack's unbelief, one of the things Della's father (himself a minister) is sure about. According to him, it is an undisputed fact that white men do not believe in God.

The narrative of *Gilead* culminates when Ames accepts Jack as his son. As has been mentioned earlier, *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* contributes to Ames's understanding of Lila's feelings, yet, it is *The Essence of Christianity* which has the function of a book which significantly shapes the tense relationship between Ames and Jack.

I called to him and he stopped and waited for me, and I walked with him up to the bus stop. I brought along *The Essence of Christianity*, which I had set on the table by the door, hoping I might have a chance to give it to him. He turned it over in his hands, laughing a little at how beat up it is. He said, "I remember this from – forever!" Maybe he was thinking it looked like the kind of thing he used to pocket in the old days. That thought crossed my mind, and it made me feel as though the book did actually belong to him. I believe he was pleased with it. I dog-eared page 20 – "Only that which is apart from my own being is capable of being doubted by me. How then can I doubt of God, who is my being? To doubt of God is to doubt of myself". And so on. I memorized that and a good bit more, so I could talk to Edward about it, but I didn't want to ruin the good time we'd had that one day playing catch, and the occasion really never arose again. (Robinson 239)

A few points concerning the quote need to be made. First and foremost, the book is "beat up", the description used for the grandfather's Greek New Testament, hereby suggesting a meaningful connection between the two works. Jack might have as well thought that the book which he was about to receive was the same book he had once stolen. Ames mentions Edward here again, since there was a great similarity but also a great difference between Ames's brother and Jack. Both know the Scripture by heart, to which *Gilead*

evidences many times. Unlike Edward, Jack seems particularly unsettled by his “categorical unbelief” (220). As a result, I see the gift of *The Essence of Christianity* as a catalyst of Ames’s tense relationship with Jack, as a means by which their reconciliation is completed and as an expression of fatherly love.

#### 4. Conclusion

While the Bible is unquestionably the novel’s major imaginative influence, Ames’s narrative frequently alludes to many other literary works, most of them of a spiritual nature. Ames is an avid reader and there is a sense of sacredness by which he approaches literature *per se*. This sense of sacredness and humility permeates all he does, be it writing (which is likened to prayer), reading, or any other activity. Books are for Ames the carriers of wisdom and some of them are worthy of commitment to memory. His careful selection of literary works mentioned in his diary supports a view of *Gilead* as training in the way of a virtuous life for his son. By showing him the interpretive potential of poetry and wisdom which a critical reader can find in books, Ames educates his son so that he can be a source of transformation in his own world.

There is a strong reciprocity of study and faith which does not mean, however, that study preconditions faith. While education is by all means a vital part of life, and literature has a great potential to shape one’s character, the central tenet of Ames’s world is in my view expressed in a wish addressed to his son whom he encourages to become a gift for others. Despite its religiosity I do not read *Gilead* as a defence of Christian religion. Although Ames’s narrative is convincing enough to demonstrate the potential of faith in life, it is the ethical dimension and neutral formulation of “being a gift” which are given equal shares of importance. The value of “being useful” functions as a thread in the novel and connects the stories of Ames’s grandfather, of Jack and of Ames himself.

There is an undoubted connection between the idea of “being a gift” and the three books which I have analysed. The Greek Testament has become his grandfather’s “gift” to Ames which reminds him of the value of being of use to others. *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* was a “gift” which helped Ames to come to the realization that only selfless love is true love and Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* was, after all, the gift of primary relevance. By presenting the book to his godson, Ames establishes a new bond between Jack and himself

which is based on forgiveness, sympathy and fatherly love. Through this symbolic act, Jack inherits Ames's message of what the qualities are of a life worth living: selflessness, humility and service to others.

### Notes

1. For the general context of postsecular fiction see McClure (2007). On the criticism of Robinson's writing see also Hungerford (2010), Stevens (2014) and Mariotti and Lane (2016).
2. Concerning his reading of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, Barack Obama in his interview with the author 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" (2015).

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